



City Neighborhood Council

c/o 700 Fifth Ave, Suite 1700, PO Box 94649, Seattle WA 98124-4649

Telephone: (206) 684-0719 Fax: (206) 233-5142 TDD: (206) 684-0446

DISTRICT COUNCILS:

- Ballard
- Central
- Delridge Neighborhoods
- Downtown
- East
- Greater Duwamish
- Lake Union
- Magnolia/Queen Anne
- North
- Northeast
- Northwest
- Southeast
- Southwest

March 27, 2007

Mayor Greg Nickels
P.O. Box 94749
Seattle, WA 98124-4749

Seattle City Councilmembers
P.O. Box 34025
Seattle, WA 98124-4025

To the Mayor and City Councilmembers:

The City Neighborhood Council urges that the \$1.5 million/year appropriated to the Neighborhood Street Fund (NSF) by November's nine-year transportation levy operate through a district council-based process, as the voters understood it would be. We oppose a Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) proposal to move the \$1.5 million/year in NSF levy funds away from this time-tested model and cut the district council-based process to \$1.2 million and fund it from the Cumulative Reserve Fund, which is less secure, and has other worthy uses.

The City Neighborhood Council is the organized voice of the thirteen district councils, which are celebrating their 20th anniversary, having been created, along with CNC, by City Council Res. 27709 (as amended by Res. 28115) to represent community members, including neighborhood businesses. The district councils use the Neighborhood Street Fund to improve pedestrian mobility and safety, and in doing so, the district councils are strengthened as instruments of grassroots democracy. Please consider the following concerns.

(1) The Neighborhood Street Fund was designed in 1997 by a partnership of the City Neighborhood Council with the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), and it has been fostered over the years by a continuation of this partnership. With the help of SDOT and the Department of Neighborhoods, the district councils solicit and consider project nominations from the public—a process that encourages members of the public who favor (or oppose) a particular project to testify before the district council, and to provide

comments in writing, by e-mail, or by phone—and then for the district councils to identify among these projects their area’s top priorities, with SDOT making the final decisions. The Neighborhood Street Fund has been an important rallying point for civic engagement, and for building each district council’s trust in SDOT decisions for those occasions when SDOT finds that it cannot accept all of a district’s priority projects.

(2) CNC has designed the Neighborhood Street Fund to give CNC itself no role in the nominating and rating of projects, but rather ensure that any member of the public may nominate a project, that the district councils hear from the public about the different projects, and that the district councils rate (that is, set priorities among) the projects, with the final project decisions made by SDOT.

(3) For the last several years as a part of the budget process, the City Neighborhood Council has written regularly to the Mayor and the City Council, urging an increase in the Neighborhood Street Fund. While the Neighborhood Street Fund is potentially an excellent way to attract public interest and involvement in the district councils, the continued low level of funding for the Neighborhood Street Fund has reduced the incentive to participate.

(4) SDOT is proposing that the district councils no longer be the focus for project nominations and ratings in the \$1.5 million/year in transportation levy funds that ordinance 122232 (which put the levy before the voters) designates as the “Neighborhood Street Fund.” Rather, SDOT is proposing that the district council process be cut to \$1.2 million/year and be funded by the Cumulative Reserve Fund (CRF). The CRF should not be substituted for levy funds for the following reasons:

(a) The Cumulative Reserve Fund is funded largely through real estate excise taxes, which fluctuate from year to year due to economic cycles. Also, real estate excise taxes are not required by state law or City ordinance to be spent on transportation, and could be taken away from the Neighborhood Street Fund at any time. In contrast, it is enforceable through the courts that section 6 of ordinance 122232 allows no other spending of the transportation levy each year until at least \$1.5 million has been appropriated for the Neighborhood Street Fund, and exclusively for “pedestrian mobility and safety.”

(b) The levy's Neighborhood Street Fund can support projects whether or not they are in a neighborhood plan, but the City requires that CRF fund only projects that are in a neighborhood plan. About 40 percent of the City's area, including neighborhoods with many children, seniors, and the disabled, is not within the boundaries of a neighborhood plan.

(c) The levy's Neighborhood Street Fund can support projects whether they are new,

or are major maintenance of existing projects--but the City requires that CRF fund only major maintenance projects, not new projects.

(d) The levy's Neighborhood Street Fund may be spent on arterial or non-arterial streets, but we are concerned that CRF and state gas tax funding of NSF projects could be restricted to arterials. Because arterials represent only 30 percent of the City's "center-line" mileage, non-arterials (many of which are in neighborhood business districts, have arterial-level traffic volumes, or have serious pedestrian or school-safety issues) should not be ineligible. Non-arterials are already neglected in the Street Maintenance portion of the Bridging the Gap transportation levy, which, despite years of CNC's letters to the Mayor and City Council, has no funds budgeted for non-arterial pavement maintenance and replacement. Pavement maintenance and replacement are often an opportunity for inexpensive mobility or public safety improvements, so non-arterials are already unfairly disadvantaged, and SDOT's proposals could compound this neglect of 70 percent of the City's streets.

(e) The Cumulative Reserve Fund should, as in recent years, continue to be available not only for pedestrian mobility and safety purposes, but also for other transportation purposes, and for parks and other capital needs. SDOT's proposals appear not to leave CRF funds for such important purposes as the rebuilding of non-arterial streets [see (d) above], or construction in parks, community centers, and other City facilities. Last year's district council-based process allocated one-fifth of CRF to parks and other non-transportation needs. Pedestrian mobility and safety are already well-funded by the transportation levy, which sets aside not only the Neighborhood Street Fund's \$13.5 million (\$1.5 million/year for nine years) solely for "pedestrian mobility and safety," but also, after that is appropriated, another 18 percent of the levy--\$63.3 million--for "bicycle, pedestrian and safety programs," for a grand total of \$76.8 million.

(5) SDOT proposes that the transportation levy's \$1.5 million/year "Neighborhood Street Fund" go largely (if not entirely) to projects of between \$300,000 and \$500,000. Doing so would perversely reward big spending, discouraging projects that cost less but deliver the same or better benefits. Under state law, projects over about \$100,000 cannot be built by City crews. Smaller projects can be built by either outside contractors or City crews, which on a per-unit basis have costs as low as half those of outside contractors. Projects of \$300,000 or more should not get a free pass, but rather should compete against other, smaller projects, so that the public, the district councils, and SDOT can compare their relative benefits and costs.

There is nothing in the Neighborhood Street Fund as it has operated for many years that prevents the district councils from considering and rating projects of \$300,000

or more. Instead, SDOT has proposed that the City Neighborhood Council play the same role in rating projects of \$300,000 to \$500,000 that CNC already does with Neighborhood Matching Fund “large project” applications. We note that following this model would still leave the district councils with half the potential rating points for each project, as with the Neighborhood Matching Fund. However, CNC believes that it is best to keep at the district council level the full responsibility for recommending to SDOT a rating for each project that has applied for the \$1.5 million in levy funds.

(6) The fact that some past multi-block projects have received Neighborhood Street Funds in several different years does not mean that single grants of \$300,000 to \$500,000 would have been better. Proceeding block-by-block increases the opportunities for grass roots citizen involvement on each block, and provides “early wins” that help in further organizing. Greater community involvement improves the design and makes it more likely that the community and SDOT see eye-to-eye on the project. It also encourages and facilitates the community effort to bring in non-SDOT funds. These are key benefits of a ground-up approach versus a top-down approach.

The design, responsiveness, and cost-effectiveness of large projects can suffer. A single large project of sidewalks on N. 97th St. that SDOT designed and contracted-out cost more than \$300,000, about the same as the multi-year Greenwood Ave. North walkway that used a combination of NSF, NMF, and private funds. For a similar amount of money, Greenwood produced more than twice the lineal feet of walkway. The block-by-block schedule on Greenwood allowed the neighborhood residents and businesses to bring in non-SDOT funds from private donors and the Neighborhood Matching Fund. Also in contrast, the community was unhappy with the N. 97th St. project, regarding its design as incompatible with the street’s Green Street designation. The block-by-block incremental approach on Greenwood ensured understanding between SDOT and the community, producing a better design that made the SDOT funds go further. It encouraged citizen initiative, which was discouraged or missed by the centralized approach.

(7) CNC re-iterates from our January 24 letter that district councils should not be limited in the number of projects they may submit for SDOT consideration. Past limits in the number of projects that could be rated discouraged districts and members of the public from recommending small projects, even those with an excellent benefit/cost ratio. Also, if one or more of the district-rated projects received funds from a source other than NSF, or was ruled as ineligible for NSF, the district did not have adequate fall-back options of other projects for SDOT to consider. Another consequence of limiting the number of rated projects was that SDOT did not see as many valuable new project proposals. Nominations by the public and ratings by the district councils are a free source of proposals and

perspectives that SDOT needs at this early stage of the nine-year levy spending.

SDOT of course has limited staff, cannot fully evaluate all project proposals, and will have to leave some nominated projects with little or no analysis. However, this resource constraint is understood by the district councils, and can be reinforced by the following policy from our January 24 letter: "The district councils will not be limited in the number of projects that they may nominate for SDOT consideration in the Neighborhood Street Fund, so long as they identify priorities among the projects, and are informed that SDOT may not be able to fully evaluate the lower priority projects."

Conclusion. Please fully maintain the Neighborhood Street Fund's district council focus, which will ensure that the transportation levy is spent well, and that the public is fully involved in the process. A revision of an earlier e-mail circulated on March 8, the above letter was circulated in draft to the district councils on March 20. After hearing presentations by SDOT and Department of Neighborhoods officials at its March 26 meeting, the City Neighborhood Council approved this letter, which has been slightly revised based on the information that they provided.

Sincerely,

[signed]

Christopher K. Leman, Chair
cleman@oo.net (206) 322-5463

cc: District Councils