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## CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

The South Lake Union (SLU) area has experienced dramatic changes over the last twenty-five years. In the past, this area supported more traditional processing-related and marine-based industries with workers living in the Cascade Neighborhood. Today, the area is home to commercial and retail establishments and, more recently, a significant number of biotechnology (bio-tech) and high-technology (high-tech) companies. The changes are expected to continue into the future with additional growth in jobs and housing. The City of Seattle estimates that by the year 2020, growth in the SLU area will result in over 20,000 new jobs and 10,000 new housing units. In addition, substantial growth is anticipated in other neighborhoods in the area, including the Denny Triangle. To ensure that the necessary infrastructure and programs are in place to support this growth, the City of Seattle is conducting the South Lake Union Transportation Study to identify needed transportation improvements and strategies.

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### Goals

The main objective of the South Lake Union Transportation Study is to form a set of transportation strategies to address existing problems and to support and shape the development of the South Lake Union Urban Village. More specifically, the City has developed the following five goals to guide the development of transportation strategies:

- 1) Improve mobility and access for all modes of transportation;
- 2) Improve regional access to and through South Lake Union;
- 3) Promote economic vitality, neighborhood livability, sustainable development, and quality of life;
- 4) Improve safety for all transportation modes; and
- 5) Work toward implementing City of Seattle Comprehensive Plan goals and other city policies and plans.

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### History and Context

The South Lake Union area has the unique distinction of bordering downtown Seattle on the south end and an urban lake (Lake Union) on the north end (see Figure 1.1 for a vicinity map). Historically, the area has been used for industrial (heavy and light), wood processing, and maritime activities, as shown by the many warehouses and railroad track remnants remaining in the area. The construction and expansion of I-5 and SR-99 in the 1950s and 1960s created barriers that isolated South Lake Union from the surrounding neighborhoods of Queen Anne and Capitol Hill.

In the 1960's the City purchased right-of-way in the vicinity of Mercer and Valley Streets for an elevated roadway, the Bay Freeway, to connect I-5 to Seattle Center, and eventually the waterfront. This project was successfully challenged in court and then rejected in a subsequent attempt for voter approval. In the following years, the City and others conducted approximately 50 studies of transportation, land use, and/or open space for South Lake Union, and considered about 30 different alternatives for the Mercer Corridor. In 1999, the South Lake Union neighborhood plan recommended against any further consideration of the "expressway" solutions that many of the past plans had sought, and instead suggested

incremental improvements, primarily within the existing street system. As a result, the City finally sold the Bay Freeway properties, freeing them for development.

The face of South Lake Union began to change when the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center (FHCRC) opened its first facility in the area. The FHCRC has expanded its own campus and drawn other bio-tech companies to the area over the past ten years. The recent arrival of a number of bio-tech and related research firms, along with the opening of a University of Washington research campus in the fall of 2004, has set the stage for continued job growth into the future.

Although the South Lake Union area has received increased attention from the recent development of bio-tech companies, this area is truly a mixture of uses, from residential to manufacturing and its future promises to continue as such. Residential uses have historically been located in the Cascade Neighborhood, between Fairview and Eastlake Avenues, but new housing is expected in other parts of the neighborhood as well. The City of Seattle expects growth in jobs and housing to be significant in the study area over the next thirty years, with much of it happening over the next twenty.



Figure 1.1: Vicinity Map

While the transportation network has been generally supportive of automobiles vs. other modes, this type of transportation system will not adequately support or facilitate the expected growth in housing and jobs in a way that supports the City of Seattle's transportation goals and policies. Furthermore, the primary emphasis for major arterials in this area has been to move through-traffic, with less consideration for SLU as a destination.

Concurrent projects have been undertaken that have potential direct impacts on the South Lake Union (SLU) neighborhood. These include the Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall Replacement Project (AWVSRP), which is looking at various treatments of Aurora Avenue N. (SR 99), which could enhance east-west connections between South Lake Union and Queen Anne, including Seattle Center. Another significant project underway is the development of a regional park, South Lake Union Park, on Lake Union north of Valley Street. The study team coordinated with these and other projects in the area to ensure recommendations are consistent with and supportive of each other.

The overall planning area for the South Lake Union Transportation Study is defined by the following boundaries: Denny Way to the south, Fifth Avenue N. to the west, I-5 to the east, and Ward Street to the north. The primary focus of this study is from Fairview Avenue (east) to Fifth Avenue N. (west) and Denny Way (south) to Valley (north). Figure 1.2 displays the boundaries of the study area.

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## **Policies and Plans**

The development of the South Lake Union Transportation Study included a review of relevant policies and plans, including the following:

**City of Seattle Comprehensive Plan:** This study supports a number of the City's policies outlined in the 1994 Comprehensive Plan (to be amended in 2004), including:

- Land use and transportation that work together to accommodate growth and change
- Providing choices to encourage changes in travel behavior
- Setting priorities for a street system that improves access and mobility
- Providing for and managing parking
- Improving non-motorized travel, transit, and public transportation
- Preserving and improving commercial transportation mobility

The City of Seattle's Department of Planning and Development is preparing the ten-year update to the Comprehensive Plan for adoption in the fall of 2004.

**The South Lake Union Neighborhood Plan:** This plan was published in 1998. The planning committee identified two plan goals specific to transportation:

- A neighborhood with an efficient east/west transportation corridor that serves neighborhood and sub-regional needs.
- A neighborhood with adequate parking available to support neighborhood businesses and activities now and in the future.

- To help reach these goals, the plan includes the following policies:
- Encourage Mercer/Valley improvements that support development of South Lake Union Park, city-owned parcels and other adjacent properties.
- Favor a set of improvements that are reasonably fundable and that do not require excessive new right-of-way.
- Explore transportation improvements that would link South Lake Union and Lower Queen Anne.

The Neighborhood Plan included a number of specific recommendations. All were considered and evaluated in this study.

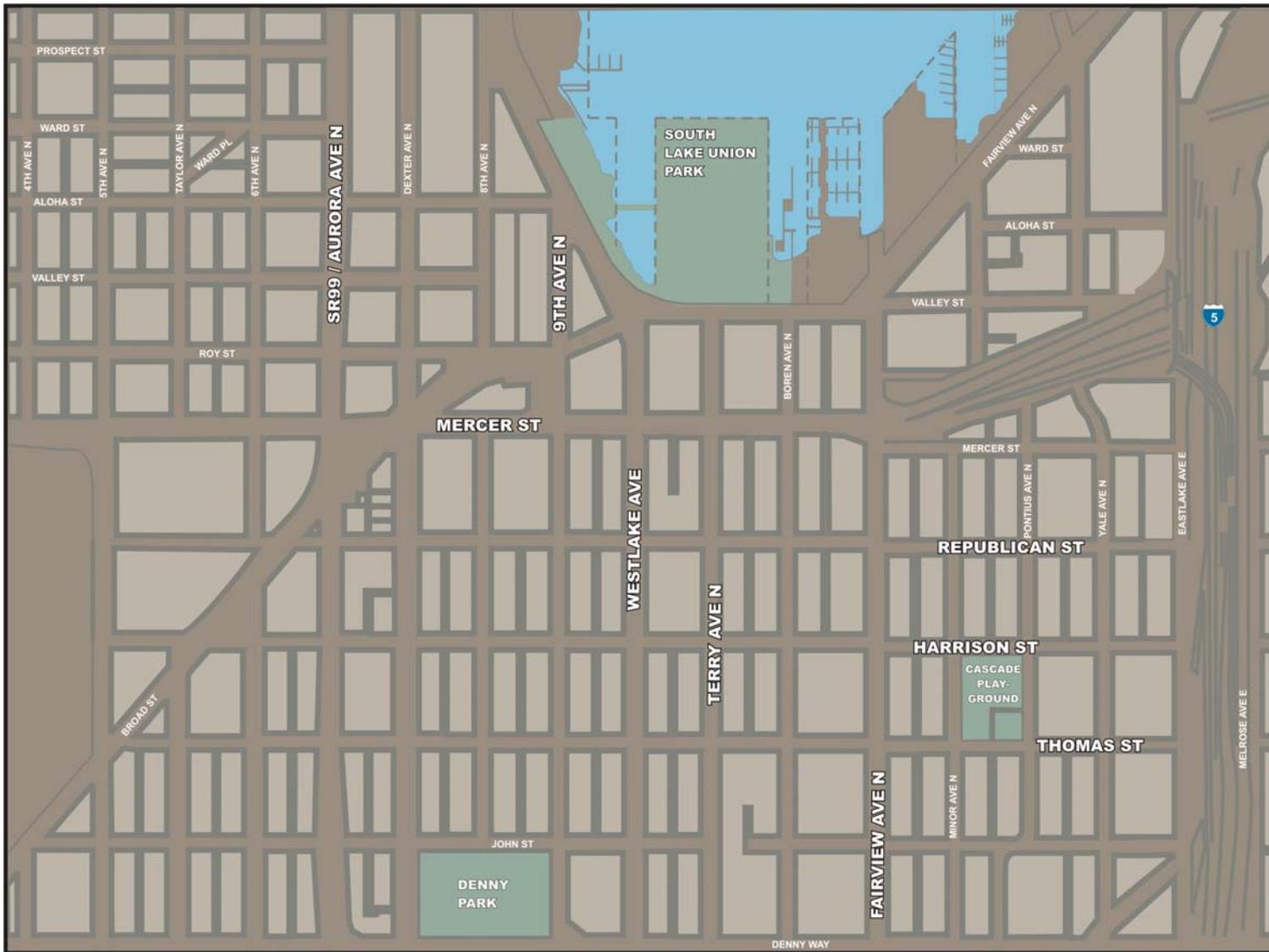


Figure 1.2: Study Area Map

**City Council Resolution:** In June 2003, the City Council adopted Resolution 30610 to support high-tech and bio-tech in the South Lake Union area: “The City Council hereby reaffirms its commitment to the redevelopment of the South Lake Union area to become the region’s most competitive location for bio-tech, clean energy and high-tech research and manufacturing.”

**Mayor’s Action Agenda for South Lake Union:** In order to guide the current study, the Mayor developed an action agenda for South Lake Union that incorporates the goals and objectives of the above noted plans and policies for SLU. The Mayor’s Action Agenda included five points:

- Attract bio-tech jobs
- Create a waterfront park
- Help create a great neighborhood
- Build Streetcar
- Improve the Mercer Corridor
- Upgrade essential utilities to provide for growth
- Promote sustainable development practices

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### **Previous Study Phases**

The South Lake Union Transportation Study is the third phase of a series of studies that have built upon each other. Phase I involved a brief summary of potential improvements to the Mercer Corridor itself. This phase examined Mercer Street from Fifth Avenue N. to the I-5 ramps at Fairview Avenue, Valley Street between Fairview Avenue and Westlake Avenue, and Broad Street from Westlake Avenue to Fifth Avenue N.

Phase II included a more detailed analysis of potential Mercer Corridor improvements and identification of a preliminary preferred solution. Traffic analysis tasks and cost estimates for this solution were developed, and a public open house was held in November 2002 to gather input from the community. The Phase II process and results are documented in the *Mercer Corridor/South Lake Union Transportation Study Phase II Report* (Parsons Brinckerhoff, April 2003, and revised June 2003).

Phase III of the study incorporates and updates results from the previous two phases and expands the analysis to encompass the entire SLU area. The process and results from Phase III of the study are documented in this report.

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### **Other Study Area Projects**

As mentioned previously, a number of other studies relevant to the SLU area have either recently been completed or are currently being undertaken. Table 1.1 lists other studies, related to the South Lake Union Transportation Study, and summarizes their relationship to this study.

**Table 1.1: Coordination with Other Projects**

| <b>Project/Study</b>                                      | <b>Relationship to SLU Transportation Study</b>  |
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| <b>Mercer Corridor Project</b>                            | The SLU Transportation Study analyzed and recommended potential solutions for the Mercer Corridor in the context of the overall SLU study area. The Mercer Corridor Project will further develop and analyze alternative solutions as part of the environmental review process.  |
| <b>Alaskan Way Viaduct/Seawall Replacement Project</b>    | The SLU Transportation Study has coordinated with the Alaskan Way Viaduct/Seawall Replacement Project (AWVSRP) and incorporated one of the EIS Alternatives under consideration for the north end; however, some details of this alternative have been modified to better meet the goals of the SLU Study. Coordination with the AWVSRP will continue.                   |
| <b>Center City Access Study</b>                           | The Center City Access Study is assessing ways to improve access to Center City neighborhoods, including during construction of the AWVSRP. This ongoing study is coordinating with the SLU Study and incorporating some SLU Study recommendations. As the study is refined, it may revise some aspects of the SLU Study recommendations.                                |
| <b>Terry Avenue N. Street Design</b>                      | Draft Terry Avenue N. Street Design Guidelines are incorporated into the SLU Transportation Study recommendations.   |
| <b>Seattle Streetcar Network and Feasibility Analysis</b> | The Seattle Department of Transportation completed the Seattle Streetcar Network and Feasibility Analysis in June 2004. This report provided an assessment of the SLU Streetcar, as well as other potential streetcar routes in Seattle.   |
| <b>South Lake Union Park Design</b>                       | The Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation will complete the design for SLU Park this summer. Compatibility with the park design and access to SLU Park was a factor in evaluating SLU Transportation Study recommendations.   |
| <b>Center City Circulation Report</b>                     | The recently completed Center City Circulation Report made recommendations for transit and non-motorized circulation improvements in the Center City neighborhoods. Recommendations relevant to the SLU Transportation Study area have been incorporated into SLU Study recommendations.   |
| <b>North Downtown Park Plan</b>                           | The North Downtown Park Plan (NDPP) is identifying park/open space needs and opportunities related to projected growth in SLU and Denny Triangle. Key elements of the SLU Transportation Study recommendations considered in the NDPP include pedestrian and bicycle access to existing facilities, green streets, and pedestrian-friendly design of streets near parks. |
| <b>Cascade Playground Design</b>                          | The SLU Transportation Study recommendations include pedestrian improvements along Thomas and Harrison Streets near the playground.  |
| <b>Seattle Center Theater District Plan</b>               | The SLU Transportation Study has been coordinating with the Seattle Center planning efforts.   |