



Seattle Department of Transportation

Gregory J. Nickels, Mayor

Grace Crunican, Director

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Dear Seattle Resident:

There is good news for all of us who want progress on Seattle's transportation problems, specifically the Mercer "mess" – that tangle of barriers and blockages in the middle of our city. I'm pleased to announce a package of transportation improvements for the South Lake Union area, including the Mercer Corridor, with broad support from a diverse group of neighborhood, business and community representatives.

The improvements call for a two-way Mercer Corridor, streetcar and a number of other transit, pedestrian and bicycle measures that, taken together:

- reconnect a growing neighborhood to the City;
- untangle streets that create barriers in the middle of Seattle;
- improve mobility for people in Queen Anne, Capitol Hill, Eastlake and surrounding neighborhoods that use this corridor;
- promote transit, walking and biking; and
- continue a smooth flow of freight and people through the corridor.

This package emerges from the South Lake Union Transportation Study that was prepared with the help of consultants, Parsons Brinckerhoff and EnviroIssues. The study documents the analysis and review of existing conditions, reports on suggestions from the public, identifies issues and alternatives, and produces the recommendations described here.

Obstacles and Opportunities

Located at the crossroads of Seattle's busiest and densest neighborhoods lies South Lake Union. For years it has been seen daily by tens of thousands of travelers who are attempting to connect to Interstate 5, Seattle Center, the waterfront and surrounding neighborhoods from all directions. Freight traffic heading to the waterfront and Interbay weaves its way through Valley, Broad and Mercer Streets. Queen Anne and the growing Uptown urban center is hostage to rush hour back-ups. As downtown neighborhoods, including the Denny Triangle,



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grow, the north-south connections through South Lake Union are choking. Neighborhoods along Eastlake and Westlake Avenues are also dependent on the transportation system in South Lake Union to provide critical access.

For decades, this tangle has been called the Mercer “mess” and we know it will worsen without investment by the city. South Lake Union is changing, which creates a challenge for City government to manage this growth. Projections for job growth in that neighborhood show 20,000 new workers coming by 2020. New housing is projected to inject the neighborhood with up to 17,000 new residents in the same time frame.

At the same time, a new waterfront park, improvements to the Cascade Playfield and neighborhood design guidelines are making South Lake Union a great new neighborhood. It is becoming a great place to live, work and visit – not just go through.

The SLU Transportation Study answers fundamental questions on how the neighborhood’s transportation system, with a history of failed attempts at a “fix”, can handle the additional demand being placed on it by its growth and that of its adjacent neighborhoods. The study looks at promoting economic vitality, neighborhood livability, sustainable development and quality of life.

SLU History

Once a seamless extension of downtown Seattle’s industrial, commercial and housing base, South Lake Union became isolated from adjacent neighborhoods due to the construction of I-5 and State Route 99 (Aurora Avenue). In the late 1960’s, the City acquired a number of properties between the two highways with the intention of constructing a “Bay Freeway” connecting I-5 to Seattle Center, and eventually to the waterfront. Although this project was successfully challenged in court and then rejected in a subsequent attempt for voter approval, the City continued to hold the properties undeveloped long after such plans were shelved. In the years that followed, 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.

The 1990’s brought with them the mandate of Growth Management Planning and with it, the City’s Comprehensive Plan and neighborhood planning process. Growth Management Policies called for density to be directed to urban centers with infrastructure improvements developed to manage that growth. Neighborhood Planning allowed local communities to recommend the form that growth would take.

A top priority of the South Lake Union Neighborhood Plan called for the City to reject the notion of a high-speed "expressway" in its neighborhood, instead calling for a series of measures that built upon the existing transportation system to increase its efficiency. As a result, the City sold the Bay Freeway properties, freeing them for development. Parts of the proceeds of that sale were set aside to pay for infrastructure improvements and this study.

Conclusion

Because of this neighborhood's importance as a gateway to many adjacent neighborhoods and interests, we formed a broad-based Stakeholders Group to advise us on the issues and findings of the Study. Three alternatives were considered, each one a package of potential improvements. We evaluated the three alternatives to determine their effectiveness in meeting Study Goals and addressing issues identified through community outreach. The results of our evaluations and Stakeholders were nearly identical, leading to the recommendations presented in this report.

After 40 years of study, a transportation plan for South Lake Union and a long-postponed fix for Mercer are within our grasp. The study that follows describes how these goals can be met. The next steps include completion of the Mercer Corridor environmental assessment and design of the streetcar connecting downtown, Denny Triangle, and South Lake Union.

We welcome your comments and your support as we move forward on this important transportation project. For questions or comments, please call me at 684-5000.

Sincerely,

Grace Crunican, Director
Seattle Department of Transportation