

# Stakeholder Interview Summary Report

Prepared for:

The Seattle Department of Transportation

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## Introduction

Stakeholder interviews were conducted to get input from a wide range of South Lake Union area interest groups and individuals on the project alternatives and how they address the area's transportation problems. This outreach was conducted as part of a comprehensive public involvement program prior to the final selection of alternatives. Twenty groups and individuals were contacted regarding the interviews. Eight interviews were conducted between May 21 and June 3, 2004.

Stakeholders were identified based on their proximity to and the potential to be affected by the project. Some stakeholders have participated in the South Lake Union (SLU) Transportation Study and/or other SLU area planning and construction projects.

Stakeholders interviewed represented the following interests:

- Center for Wooden Boats
- Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center
- PEMCO
- Queen Anne Community Council
- Uptown Alliance
- South Lake Union Friends and Neighbors (SLUFAN) – work, live and own property in the area
- Trammell Crow Company
- Pacific Northwest Ballet
- Seattle Sonics and Storm

A member of the design team and a member of the public involvement team attended each interview. The interview began with a brief presentation of the alternatives by the design team member. Each interview proceeded differently, but in general, the following questions were addressed in each interview.

1. Are you familiar with the Mercer Corridor Project?
2. How would you describe the project? Do you have any preconceptions about it?
3. How would you describe your interest in the Mercer Corridor (business [type of business], resident, etc.)?
4. (If business) How large is your business or how many are directly or indirectly employed by your industry/business in the area? How long has your business operated here?
5. Do you belong to an organized group that has an interest in the Mercer Corridor (if yes, name, size, and contact)?
6. During project development a number of objectives were identified for improvements to meet. Of these, which do you think are high, medium, or low priorities? Why, and what are the potential tradeoffs associated with meeting the objectives?
  - Enhance area around S. Lake Union Park and improve pedestrian connections between the neighborhood and park/waterfront

- Use a multi-modal approach to improve mobility into and through S. Lake Union (what does this mean to you – automobiles? Freight? Transit? Bicycles? All?)
  - Improve regional access to S. Lake Union and Queen Anne/Seattle Center
  - Improve access and mobility within the neighborhood for all modes (getting around within the neighborhood)
  - Improve safety for cars, bikes, and pedestrians throughout the corridor
  - Provide better connections between S. Lake Union and Queen Anne
  - Support economic development goals for S. Lake Union
  - Compatibility with other projects (Alaskan Way Viaduct, SLU Park, Seattle Streetcar, etc.)
7. What are your primary issues and concerns related to the Mercer Corridor Project? Why?
  8. Are you familiar with the alternatives being considered? If so, do you have a preference? Why?
  9. Some of the comments we received at the public open house included the following ideas about modifying the alternatives. What do you think of these ideas? Do you have others?
    - Continuing the two-way Mercer concept across Aurora Avenue
    - Putting Mercer underground
    - Combining aspects of the two alternatives
    - Enhancing public transportation along the corridor
  10. What will it take for this project to be successful?
  11. Would you or your group/business be interested in being involved in this planning process (if yes, how [meetings, electronically, etc.]?)
  12. Have you been involved in past planning efforts in the South Lake Union Area? If so, how would you describe your efforts/involvement? Do you have any suggestions on ways to improve planning efforts?
  13. Do you have any questions you would like to ask?
  14. Are you interested in participating in a stakeholder work group (end of June)?
  15. Is there anything else you think SDOT should know as they enter this planning process?

## **Comment Summary**

The following comments are sorted into categories based on the general themes that emerged from the interviews. The bulleted comments included for each category do not include every comment made. Rather, they reflect the range of comments for that category.

### ***Comments about Alternative B***

Most comments about Alternative B were positive. Positive comments most often focused on the component of this alternative that creates a narrower Valley Street, enhancing the waterfront and improving safe access for pedestrians and bicycles. Those comments included:

- Alternative B moves traffic away from lake, making it safer and more bicycle and pedestrian friendly.
- A smaller Valley Street improves public access to the water.
- Alternative B enhances the park area (more retail and pedestrian friendly).
- The two-way Mercer alternative has the potential for the biggest impact for the area, to help traffic, and give the city the opportunity to design a grand boulevard.
- Alternative B improves the look and feel of this highly used entry to downtown Seattle.
- The two-way Mercer alternative provides a pleasant egress from the interstate, with a wide median.
- Alternative B gets rid of the awkward Mercer curve onto I-5.
- A two-way Mercer Street is good for access to the Mercer parking garage. However, it might make leaving the Mercer garage (after an event) worse than current situation.

There was one negative comment about Alternative B and its potential to reduce eastbound traffic on Mercer.

- Alternative B does not increase traffic capacity on Mercer. Rather, it reduces eastbound traffic capacity, which is problematic for Seattle Center interests (event traffic).

### ***Comments about Alternative A***

The comments received on Alternative A indicated limited support as indicated in the comments about this alternative.

- Alternative A would appear to move traffic westbound, improving the bottleneck on the I-5 exit ramp. However, Alternative A does not do much to fix eastbound Mercer traffic. Not addressing both directions of traffic is problematic.
- Alternative A degrades the park and shoreline, it doesn't improve traffic, and it cuts off east/west streets from each other.

### ***Bicycle access and facilities***

There was substantial support for improving bicycle access and safety. In some cases, specific suggestions for bicycle facilities were made. The comments included:

- Increase bike facilities.
- Improve bicycle access and make it pedestrian friendly.
- Include a bicycle planner (or representative from bicycle group) as part of the planning team.
- Somewhere within the project area try experiment with a new bike curb that is a few inches higher than roadway, but still lower than the sidewalk. This could increase bicycle usage, which could in turn reduce auto traffic. This shift could result in the less needed road repairs (spending less on roads), therefore it makes sense to invest in this type of thing.

## ***Pedestrian connections***

Pedestrian safety and connections were also mentioned in participant's comments about Alternative B. Additional comments included suggestions for improving pedestrian connections not only within, but also to the SLU area from other neighborhoods.

- Pedestrian connections should be enhanced between Capitol Hill, Queen Anne, and SLU Park. The most important pedestrian connection is to the Cascade Neighborhood. Youth programs in the Cascade Neighborhood currently do not come to SLU Park because it is too difficult and dangerous to go there.
- Include a pedestrian planner on the project team.
- Reconnect the street grid that Aurora currently cuts through.

## ***Seattle Center event traffic and corridor capacity***

Seattle Center interests provided some comments on how the project might improve Seattle Center traffic flow. Those comments included:

- Turn the Memorial Stadium into a parking garage to create easy access to and from Aurora and I-5. This would eliminate the need for traffic improvements beyond (west of) Mercer and 5th and it would reduce some of the traffic around the Center.
- Neither alternative increases capacity for eastbound traffic on Mercer, which does not help Seattle Center event traffic. An additional alternative that moves more event traffic is needed.

## ***Aesthetics and design considerations***

In addition to relieving traffic congestion, some suggested ways to improve area aesthetics. Specific comments included:

- Even though traffic volume (capacity) can't be increased, this project can make it more enjoyable to drive in the area.
- Exit 167 is a main gateway to Seattle for many people and driving on it should be a good experience.
- Have architectural detailing and craftsmanship at eye level for drivers and pedestrians to allow them to "experience" SLU and provide them with a sense of what's happening at South Lake Union Park.
- Consider beauty of design, alongside efficiency of moving traffic. SDOT must coordinate with the City Parks Department and architects.
- Incorporate signage that makes people come back here because it is green and quiet, and has many interesting activities.
- Design the two-way Mercer alternative to allow motorists with little glimpses of SLU Park.

## ***Construction and construction related impacts***

Participants expressed concern about potential construction related impacts and urged SDOT to minimize those impacts as much as possible by providing regular construction

information and maintaining mobility through the area during construction. Specific suggestions included:

- In project planning, consider impacts on businesses during construction.
- Consider access during construction, particularly to marinas and restaurants along Valley. Address attracting new business to the neighborhood throughout construction, and continuing the current momentum.
- Mobility during construction is a must, both for automobiles and pedestrians.
- Have a website for the most up to date construction information.

### ***Comments related to putting Mercer underground***

In general participants felt that putting Mercer underground would be an ideal solution, but economically unrealistic and not worth the cost. Comments included:

- Burying Mercer would be ideal, although it is likely too costly and unrealistic.
- This concept (unimpeded by traffic lights) would facilitate the majority of eastbound traffic on Mercer because they are going to I-5.
- Include one or two exits in the design to allow for local traffic.
- Put Mercer underground from I-5 to the Seattle Center (near 5th Ave parking lot) because this is a destination spot and there is physical space to accommodate the infrastructure within the lot.
- Include cost estimates of putting Mercer underground. It should still accommodate traffic across Mercer, particularly to the Cascade area.
- Choose the concept that works most gracefully, and is most economical.

### ***Enhancing public transportation along the corridor***

There was overwhelming support for improving public transportation within, to and through the project area. Specific suggestions were wide ranging and included modes such as the streetcar, Metro, a Lake Union ferry, the monorail and connections to downtown, the U-District and Fremont. Specific comments included:

- Compatibility with Aurora and the streetcar is key.
- Make the most positive connection to viaduct.
- The streetcar is a good concept to reduce car traffic, particularly if it can be extended both to the University and International districts.
- Incorporate/facilitate the streetcar as a critical component to the Park and a vital link between SLU and downtown. Streetcar could also eventually be connected to the U-District. Existing transit options are insufficient.
- Consider streetcar connections to other transit modes including the downtown bus tunnel, monorail, light rail, train station, as well as serving as a mode of transportation within the SLU neighborhood.
- Use shuttles or other modes to connect SLU to downtown.
- Coordinate with Metro routes 66 and 70.
- Include a ferry landing at SLU Park or other transit modes (boats can carry bikes and pedestrians) to enable boat traffic to Fremont and the University District, and even to the east side.

- Allow for future expansion of the monorail to go east in the Mercer area. The monorail is important to overall mass transit planning. The streetcar does not accommodate mass transit.
- Try to find a new home for industrial/commercial activities on Lake Union.

### ***Other specific comments/suggestions***

The following section includes miscellaneous comments and suggestions.

- Narrowing Mercer would put increased pressure on the drop-off lane at Pacific Northwest Ballet and McCaw Hall.
- A wider throughway should be designed under Aurora for pedestrians and bicycles.
- Include sustainable features to upkeep Seattle’s reputation for being environmentally friendly.
- Traffic flow on Mercer is a priority to cross traffic.
- Eliminate one-way streets where possible.
- Create a rainwater collection system as part of project. Could start at REI, then come through the next block to Cascade Park (meander it through the park), take it then to Terry Street and have it visible (above ground). Bring it down Terry through system to clean it and then bring it into SLU Park (west side near Kenmore Air) and create a mini wetland (that can help keep Lake Union clean).

## **Project Objectives**

Interviewees were asked to give each of the project objectives a *high, medium* or *low* priority. However, the responses to the question were not in all cases so straightforward. Interviewees provided comment, but did not always “rank” the objectives. The following summarizes the comments and rankings of the project objectives. The objectives are not listed in order of priority.

- 1. Improve safety for cars, bikes, and pedestrians throughout the corridor**  
Generally, interviewees seemed to think that “Improving safety for cars, bikes, and pedestrians throughout the corridor” was a “no brainer” and should “of course,” be done.
- 2. Support economic development goals for S. Lake Union**  
While interviewees were mostly in favor of “supporting economic development goals for South Lake Union,” many indicated that it was not itself an objective of this project. Rather, all the other project objectives support (or will contribute to) increased economic development.
- 3. Use a multi-modal approach to improve mobility into and through S. Lake Union (what does this mean to you – automobiles? Freight? Transit? Bicycles? All?)**  
Of those interviewees who responded directly to this question, all of them indicated that this objective has a high priority. This is the only objective that received all high marks.

**4. Enhance area around S. Lake Union Park and improve pedestrian connections between the neighborhood and park/waterfront**

This objective did not receive a high priority from all respondents. However, it was widely supported as important for the area, and for the project to support, even by stakeholders not directly affected by such an improvement.

**5. Improve regional access to S. Lake Union and Queen Anne/Seattle Center**

**6. Improve access and mobility within the neighborhood for all modes (getting around within the neighborhood)**

**7. Provide better connections between S. Lake Union and Queen Anne**

Interviewees assigned varying levels of priority to Objectives 5-7. Some felt it was most important to improve within neighborhood connections, while other strongly supported better connections between neighborhoods, and still others strongly supported regional connections.

**8. Compatibility with other projects (Alaskan Way Viaduct, SLU Park, Seattle Streetcar, etc.)**

Respondents did not disagree with this priority, but in some cases indicated that it should not have to be an objective. Rather, “it should just be done” because it “makes sense” to do it.

### ***Suggestions for improving communication outreach efforts***

Many of these stakeholders have been involved in other planning projects. Based on those experiences, they offered a range of suggestions for improving planning projects and associated outreach efforts.

- Get commuters involved. Stand at a traffic signal and poll drivers on their preferences (quick and easy participation by commuters).
- Obtain neighborhood input and possibly bring a lunchtime presentation to local businesses to get employee input. They are the constituents.
- Get input from the residential community by doing evening presentations on the project at the larger apartment complexes.
- Clarify the benefit/advantages of the project at a neighborhood, local and regional scale to help people see the bigger picture. This should include outreach, demonstrate you have listened, that you are up front and honest, and that there is no hidden agenda for SLU development.
- Seattle needs a master plan to determine how much traffic this area can handle, how much green space, how many single residences, etc. If we cannot safely move people then we have to consider capping growth here and plan for growth in other areas.
- Have a tremendous amount of communication and open lines with the business owners along the alignment.
- Be responsive and address issues as they arise.

## Conclusions

The following represents a summary of the key points that emerged from the stakeholder interviews.

- As indicated by the importance placed on multi-modal access and mobility to and through South Lake Union, as well as other related comments, most interviewees see the project as a project to address the area's transportation problems. Most supported non-transportation related project objectives but made them a lower priority for the corridor.
- Most people commented that they supported the concept of making Valley a narrower street because it would make it more bicycle and pedestrian friendly (safe), and would enhance the park area. Making the area easier and safer to use for pedestrians and bicycles is important to most people. The results of this interview indicate that the objective "Improve safety for cars, bikes, and pedestrians throughout the corridor" is highly supported.
- Many of the interviewees asked questions about or expressed concerns about construction impacts associated with this project. Suggestions were made to keep the public and surrounding businesses informed and to maintain a regularly updated website with construction information.
- Most people commented on the need to improve public transportation to, through, and within the South Lake Union area. Suggestions for how to accomplish such an objective were varied. There was strong support for the streetcar and an expanded Metro service to improve the connection between SLU and downtown.
- There was acknowledgement and in some cases expressed disappointment that none of the current alternatives allow for increased traffic capacity. Increased capacity, particularly for eastbound Mercer was particularly important to Seattle Center interests.
- The two most commonly asked questions by interviewees were about the project schedule and project funding.