

March 16, 2017

Mr. Eric Tweit
Seattle Department of Transportation
via e-mail

Re: One Center City Near-Term Mobility Strategies

Dear Mr. Tweit,

An ad-hoc committee made up of members from the Planning Commission and Design Commission has reviewed the potential near-term mobility strategies under consideration by the One Center City team and would like to provide the following comments.

General Issues

The plan should reflect a clearly articulated vision for downtown. While we appreciate the urgency that the One Center City team faces in addressing short-term mobility needs, we feel strongly that the mobility strategies should serve a well-defined vision for downtown's future character. That vision should include the public realm, especially the experience of using our streets and open spaces as workers, shoppers, and visitors as we walk, bike, ride, and drive downtown. Establishing a vision for downtown would greatly assist evaluating the appropriateness of short- and long-term mobility strategies.

Convention center expansion timing. As pointed out by the One Center City project materials, one of the key factors contributing to the need for near-term mobility strategies is that Downtown Seattle Transit Tunnel buses are to be moved to surface streets in 2019 due to the planned expansion of the Washington State Convention Center. This facility will be a significant generator of transit service and will benefit from proximity to high-capacity transit connections. It may be counter-productive to construct the Convention Center addition before 2021, when Link light rail is operating to Northgate and fewer buses would need to access downtown Seattle, or even 2023, when Link is operating to Lynnwood and Bellevue, and even fewer buses would need to access the downtown core. If the anticipated costs to build the Convention Center addition do not differ much between now and then, we would recommend waiting for Link expansion and further development of the One Center City program before constructing this regional facility.

Safety should be a priority. We appreciate the inclusion of Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety as an evaluation criterion. The City of Seattle has made a commitment to Vision Zero, a goal that warrants at least as much consideration as movement of vehicles when developing and evaluating alternatives. For example, one of the options under consideration for the North-South Avenues degrades safety for bicycles by removing the existing bike lane on 4th Avenue. This should not be an option.

Commissioners

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Consider other important evaluation measures. At least two additional measures should be considered:

- **Noise** – the effect each option has on noise levels, especially at the street level. Minimizing and managing noise greatly influences the attractiveness of retail areas, opportunities to offer outdoor seating and dining, the quality of the pedestrian and cyclist experience, and residential living downtown.
- **Visual blockages** – the potential for a wall of buses to occur should be identified. Visual blockages of adjacent land uses, such as retail, should be minimized.

Timeframe. It is important to indicate how long these mobility strategies would be in place. Some of the potential strategies, such as a transit-only street on 5th Avenue, would have impacts to livability and the pedestrian experience. Please identify those components that are considered short-term versus permanent. Please also describe how short-term solutions would transition to long-term strategies.

Meeting mobility needs. It is unclear how effectively each option meets downtown’s future mobility needs. The plan should identify the degree to which short-term, low-cost options would adequately serve anticipated demands in order to indicate whether they can effectively buy time to implement permanent strategies consistent with the vision for downtown. It is essential to understand whether Link light rail will offer sufficient capacity through the tunnel to support truncating multiple bus routes outside of downtown.

Increasing downtown connections. Continued growth in South Lake Union raises the question about how best to connect it with other parts of downtown. One Center City offers an opportunity to enhance connections by all modes, especially transit, to reduce driving trips and boost mobility throughout downtown.

Quantifying important differences between options. The relative difference between options shown in the decision matrix is much better understood when essential features are quantified. For example, knowing the number of buses on each street significantly influences the reader’s assessment of options. Capital and operating costs, vehicle volumes, capacity, demand, mode share, and other relevant measures should be quantified as part of the decision matrix.

North-South Avenues

Options B and C each emphasize improvements for a single mode. Option B provides additional bicycle access and safety improvements, but not increased transit capacity. Option C provides additional transit capacity but not additional bicycle access and safety, as it actually reduces them by removing the existing bicycle lane on 4th Avenue. We consider this to be unacceptable, and therefore Option C should be removed from consideration. In fact, in the Near-Term Strategies Decision Matrix, the rating for Option C under the “Completion of Center City Bicycle” criteria should not be the same as the rating for Option A. Rather, it should be given a higher risk/lower benefit rating since it degrades the access and safety for bicycles in comparison to existing conditions.

Option D creates a transit-only 5th Avenue, significantly altering one of the best pedestrian streets downtown. Apart from requiring major changes to the streetscape that we are concerned about, 5th Avenue is not an appropriate street on which to concentrate high volumes of buses (an average of 265 buses in the peak hour) due to its narrower right-of-way, its retail emphasis, and its distance from where riders live and work. Given that current transit routes center on 3rd Avenue with other routes on 2nd and 4th Avenues, within 1 or 2 blocks walk for most riders, shifting routes up the hill to 5th creates potential barriers to transit customers. This could be particularly challenging for less able-bodied passengers. The evaluation of this transit-only 5th Avenue option should indicate the share of riders who would have to walk up from 1st or 2nd Avenues to reach their buses and how that promotes or discourages ridership. Also, the high volume of buses on 5th with Option D and the potential for visual blockages from a wall of buses pose significant challenges to the future success of small-scale retail and other street level uses along 5th Avenue.

Pike/Pine

Options B and C both improve bike access and safety for connections between Capitol Hill and downtown Seattle. However, for both options, there is a gap in the bike lane on Pine Street shown between 4th and 5th Avenues. This missing link will be confusing and potentially unsafe for bicyclists, and will degrade the overall downtown bicycle network. This should be remedied in a manner that is safe and predictable for cyclists.

Between 8th Avenue and Broadway, both options also provide improved bike access and safety. However, the key difference between the two options is that Option B provides protected bike lanes in both directions on Pike Street, while Option C converts Pine and Pike Streets from two-way streets into a pair (“couplet”) of one-way streets. As one-way streets tend to encourage higher-speed movement of vehicular traffic, the conversion of Pine and Pike to one-way streets runs counter to the idea of creating a pedestrian-friendly environment. In addition, one sub-option for Option C also proposes the conversion of a parking lane on one side of the street to a transit-only lane. While a transit-only lane would be helpful for speed and reliability of Capitol Hill bus routes, the potential impact to local businesses from lost parking should be considered carefully, especially when the No Build scenario shows a travel time impact of only 0.5 minutes with no action. If a transit-only lane is deemed necessary, one potential alternative to Option C to consider would be to maintain parking on both sides of Pine and Pike Streets, with use of the right-side parking lane for transit only during peak hours.

Thank you for considering these comments as you review the options for near-term mobility strategies.

Sincerely,

David Shelton, Seattle Planning Commission

on behalf of

David Goldberg, Seattle Planning Commission
Ross Tilghman, Seattle Design Commission
Patti Wilma, Seattle Planning Commission

cc:

Scott Kubly, Tracy Krawczyk, Diane Wiatr, Chisaki Muraki-Valdovinos; Seattle Department of Transportation
Sam Assefa, Gary Johnson, Lyle Bicknell; Office of Planning and Community Development