



City of Seattle

Seattle Planning Commission

DATE: September 11, 2020

TO: Diane Wiatr, Seattle Department of Transportation

FROM: Seattle Planning Commission Land Use & Transportation Committee

- David Goldberg, Chair
- Michael Austin
- Katherine Idziorek
- Rick Mohler
- Rian Watt
- Patti Wilma

RE: Ballard-Interbay Regional Transportation System

On behalf of the Seattle Planning Commission's Land Use and Transportation Committee, we would like to thank you for providing our committee a recent update on the Ballard-Interbay Regional Transportation System (BIRT) project. We appreciate the opportunity to follow the progress of this effort to improve mobility for people and freight in a complex urban environment. It is our understanding that the scope of this project was directed by state legislation and did not originate with the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT). At the same time, it is being completed with the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. With these factors in mind, we recognize that this project may not reflect the style and substance of a typical SDOT planning effort. However, your recent briefing raised some significant concerns about the project among our members, which we would like to share with you and your team before your study is completed.

The planning horizon of the BIRT study extends to the year 2042 for forecasting growth and multi-modal transportation needs in the study area. Despite this long timeframe, over which Seattle must significantly reduce single-occupancy vehicle trips in order to meet our climate goals, our committee is concerned that the analysis does not currently address important bike, pedestrian, and transit network needs that reflect the ultimate redevelopment potential along the Interbay-to-Ballard corridor. We are also concerned that the project scope and resulting analysis fail to reflect serious consideration of Seattle's environmental and racial equity goals and values, including the imperative to share power with Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), low-income, and other communities traditionally excluded from city planning processes.

Multi-Modal Network. The BIRT project goals include providing a system that "safely accommodates all travelers" including "more vulnerable travelers who walk, bike, and use transit." This study area is currently characterized by a transportation system that prioritizes automobile and truck traffic. Facilities for safe walking and bicycle transportation are inadequate throughout the study area, presenting a challenging and dangerous environment for non-motorized travel. We are concerned that this project continues a legacy of focusing investments on behalf of single-occupant vehicles (SOV) at the expense of meeting an urgent need for bike, pedestrian, and transit infrastructure improvements. **In order for the output of this effort to comport with Seattle's citywide goals and values, we recommend that SDOT's BIRT report include explicit goals to reduce SOV trips and encourage active transportation throughout the study area.**

The scope of this project as directed by the state legislation places emphasis on maintaining the current and future (motor vehicle) capacities of the Ballard and Magnolia Bridge replacement alternatives. The project goals include direction to “improve other elements of a connected transportation system.” Our committee has spent a significant amount of time over the past few years considering the future of the Interbay-to-Ballard corridor with the addition of three light rail stations (Smith Cove, Interbay, and Ballard), redevelopment of the Armory site, and transit-oriented redevelopment throughout the corridor. The future of this planning area will require significant investment in an integrated multi-modal transportation network that accommodates all modes, but prioritizes infrastructure for transit, bikes, and pedestrians to build out the necessary components of a truly connected system.

Industrial Land. The Interbay-to-Ballard corridor is an area of Seattle with a large amount of industrial land designated as the Ballard-Interbay-North End Manufacturing and Industrial Center (BINMIC). This land use pattern is associated with heavy truck traffic on the local freight network and has traditionally not supported non-motorized (bike and pedestrian) uses. The Planning Commission has historically supported industrial land uses and recognizes the importance of preserving the MICs. However, we also recognize the potential for new land uses in the corridor associated with the development of the future light rail stations and transit-oriented development. **Our committee encourages the BIRT team to continue coordination with the Mayor’s Industrial Maritime Strategy to determine the appropriate mix of transportation infrastructure to meet the needs of current and future land uses in the study area.**

Climate Change. We are discouraged that the BIRT study does not currently include explicit acknowledgement of the risks associated with climate change or strategies intended to mitigate the impacts of climate change. Interbay is a documented area that will experience sea-level rise. Any long-range planning effort should recognize the significance of this risk and identify methods to avoid subjecting land uses and transportation networks to these risks. **The BIRT should also acknowledge the City of Seattle’s Climate Action Plan by identifying transportation investments that minimize and mitigate carbon emissions associated with traditional automobile-dominant travel patterns.**

Anti-Racist Planning. Our committee recognizes that one of the BIRT project goals is to “advance projects that meet the needs of communities of color and those of all incomes, abilities, and ages” in order to “build a more racially equitable, and socially just, transportation system.” **We support the use of the City’s Racial Equity Toolkit** for all planning projects and encourage the study team to utilize this important process for identifying future transportation investments that ensure racial equity throughout the study area.

Community Engagement. We understand that conducting a comprehensive planning study during the COVID-19 pandemic does not allow for comprehensive community and stakeholder engagement. The study team has informed us that the BIRT project is a technical study, not an outreach and engagement study. Nonetheless, the public engagement results presented to us demonstrate an abundance of comments from vocal community members concerned with the future of the Ballard and Magnolia Bridges. **Despite the limitations on in-person outreach due to the pandemic, we encourage ongoing and transparent engagement with the full range of community members, stakeholders, and elected officials**

throughout the process. This includes outreach to under-represented populations including BIPOC communities.

We strongly recommend conducting outreach beyond the study area boundaries to gain input on important transportation connectivity opportunities. For example, it would be useful to include Seattle Pacific University to identify any access improvements to help students, faculty, staff commute from the Interbay-Ballard corridor to campus. We are concerned that the current study is being overwhelmed by a large number of comments on a particular issue -- bridge replacement -- at the detriment of widespread but quieter public interest in a livable, walkable, and rideable city.

Thank you again for the opportunity to review the Ballard-Interbay Regional Transportation System project and provide our comments. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Vanessa Murdock, Seattle Planning Commission Executive Director, or John Hoey, Seattle Planning Commission Senior Policy Analyst. We look forward to reviewing the draft and final report when they are published.