Seattle
design
Commission

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Cathal Ridge, Central Corridor Director
Sound Transit
401 S Jackson St
Seattle, WA 98104

Re: Urban Design implications – ST3 – Seattle segment alignment and station location options

As Sound Transit completes early initial scoping for the West Seattle and Ballard Link Light Rail extensions, the Seattle Design Commission (SDC) offers the following comments concerning urban design impacts of the proposed alignments and designated station locations. While urban design is not normally considered this early in the process, we believe that this input will help guide the refinement of the various alignment and station options and better meet public expectations about a civic project of this size and scale.

Advancing urban design aligns with the premise of Sound Transit's (ST) Early Scoping Initiative to conduct substantive planning and outreach towards a ST Board decision on a preferred alternative, thereby streamlining the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process and, ultimately, project delivery. Our request for advancing urban design is further supported by Federal law that requires the use of visualization techniques in transportation planning, and provides guidance to this end. The Federal Transit Authority (FTA) has published "Planning for Transit Supportive Development" which includes an entire chapter (Chapter G) on 'Tools and Techniques for Visualizing and Communicating Scenarios and Alternatives'. https://www.transit.dot.gov/funding/funding-finance-resources/transit-oriented-development/planning-transit-supportive

The SDC has long advocated for elevating and integrating urban design values into complex, engineered corridor structures and systems. In addition to our ten-year involvement in the City's Light Rail Review Panel, the SDC has advocated for integrating aesthetics, environmental performance, and user-based amenities into investments including the Alaska Way/SR-99 corridor, Northgate pedestrian bridge, and the bridges and lid segments of SR-520. The SDC understands that large scale transportation projects can balance the realities of delivering significant public facilities with urban design solutions that enhance the urban and natural environments.

As of the date of this letter, the SDC has received two briefings on the current proposals that included presentations by Sound Transit and City

of Seattle staff. These briefings provided essential information about the proposal, further supported by SDC staff briefings.

The Commissions comments here focus on urban design issues related to the alignment and prospective stations, with the understanding that the Seattle Planning Commission will provide focused input on the land use aspects of alternatives currently under review.

Guideway and Station Location Recommendations

A. Overall alignment

1. Thoroughly evaluate guideway design options before deciding on a preferred alternative. It will only be possible to evaluate and compare alternatives if a realistic visual impression of the guideways in their neighborhood context is presented.
2. Explore guideway designs that are visually interesting and that address impacts that include bulk, scale, and aesthetics.

B. Ballard Station to Seattle Center Station

1. Study placing the Ballard station below grade to minimize impacts to the urban environment of this neighborhood.
2. Study placing the Ballard station on property outside of the right-of-way, co-located with mixed use development, to minimize the impact to the public realm and to better integrate it with the development in this fast-growing urban village.
3. Explore a tunnel crossing of the Ship Canal to minimize impacts to the urban and natural environments.
4. Explore a Ballard crossing that is at a higher elevation than the bridge in the representative alignment to reduce visual and functional impacts of an operable bridge.
5. Study replacing the Ballard Bridge with a structure that combines all modes.
6. Study an alignment west of 15th Ave W and Elliott Ave W, including within the BNSF rail corridor, to minimize visual impacts of the guideway and to consolidate transportation facilities.
7. Provide elevations that show the anticipated alignment throughout the Elliott Corridor.
8. Provide visualizations and options for the proposed Ballard terminus that include heights and orientation for future expansion to the north or east.

C. Smith Cove Station to Stadium Station

1. Study station alignments that provide a seamless user experience at Westlake and the Chinatown/ID stations. The representative alignment/locations pose significant urban design challenges in facilitating transfers.
2. Consider an alternative to the proposed Chinatown ID cut and cover tunnel identified in the representative alignment. This construction method imposes significant impacts on the public realm in the communities where it occurs and disrupts intact neighborhoods.
3. Consider options to bring influence of Midtown station to areas east of I-5 including station location, station entrances, and improved pedestrian crossings over I-5.
4. Show options for portal locations in the Uptown neighborhood including the anticipated dimensions and related infrastructure.

D. Stadium Station to Delridge

1. Develop a solution to provide seamless transfers between the existing and proposed SODO and Stadium station platforms including a shared alignment, an alignment that allows for at grade stations, and other solutions that ease pedestrian movements between alignments.
2. Consider alternatives to a separate bridge crossing of the Duwamish, including a tunnel and

co-location on the existing West Seattle bridge.

3. Evaluate various alignment heights and locations relative to the existing West Seattle Bridge.
4. Evaluate options that reduce the visual impacts of the elevated guideway, including the segment between the SODO station and the West Seattle Bridge approach. This segment will create significant visual impacts and should include an in-depth analysis in ways to reduce the height, bulk and scale of this segment along with its visual impacts.

E. Delridge to Alaska Junction

1. Explore options that reduce guideway heights that appear to exceed 120 feet in height.
2. Explore a tunnel to avoid guideways.
3. Explore how all stations can be significantly reduced in height, including locations at grade or underground.
4. Evaluate locating or collocating proposed stations that achieve better integration within West Seattle neighborhoods and their respective residential population densities.
5. Provide visualizations and options for the West Seattle terminus including heights and orientation for future expansion.

Process Recommendations

Good outcomes on infrastructure projects come from approaches that address tough questions early in the process, rather than later. For that reason:

1. We recommend that guideways and stations be visualized within their contexts as soon as possible. Given the topography of Seattle it is nearly impossible to hold meaningful conversations about the alignments and station locations without visualizations of project details. This is of importance for representing the overwater crossings, the West Seattle corridor, and the various guideways and the structural features that support it, and the elevated stations. Through such visualizations the public can more fully understand their impacts and provide informed public comment.
2. In addition to your Purpose and Need analysis, define goals for urban design and aesthetics early in the process to measure the desirability and impacts of the various guideway and station alternatives. Aesthetics and urban design are often addressed in a perfunctory way in the early phases of project development. However, we often see urban design and aesthetics becoming significant development challenges as the public becomes more informed and involved. The public's expectations about incorporating infrastructure into neighborhoods have been heightened over recent years, looking to large public investments to add civic value beyond meeting specific program mandates. Civic value does not prevent projects from being delivered on time and on budget. It is a misconception to believe that good design adds cost and is in competition with transportation delivery and operational goals. The most recent example of that design/operational balance comes from our involvement in the SR-520 project, where the SDC supported a reduced lid that provided significant cost reductions while creating better solutions to achieve a primary goal of neighborhood integration. If urban design goals are developed early in the process and used to evaluate key project features, the result can be more efficient and better address public expectations.
3. Elevate the role of urban design professionals in analyzing alternatives. Integrated design is the state-of-the-art in infrastructure design. Do not wait to bring the urban designers into the process until after key decisions have been made. Urban designers can highlight solutions that save cost, add value, and avoid public frustration about lost opportunities for successful neighborhood guideway and station integration later in the process.

Conclusion

The SDC very much appreciates the opportunity to provide comments on the Seattle light rail alignment and station options for ST 3. We strongly recommend that Sound Transit bring urban design analysis into the alternatives evaluation process as soon as possible, before selecting a preferred alignment and before the project begins its next phase. Embedding architecture and urban design professionals into the process now will help develop solutions that better integrate the stations and guideway into our urban environment.

Sincerely,

Michael Jenkins, Executive Director
Seattle Design Commission

CC: Mayor Jenny A. Durkan
Seattle City Councilmembers
ST3 Elected Leadership Group
Sam Assefa, Office of Planning and Community Development
Jon Layzer, Seattle Department of Transportation