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July 19, 2016

Alison Townsend, Strategic Advisor
Seattle Department of Transportation
P.O. Box 34996
Seattle, WA 98124-4996

Dear Ms. Townsend:

The Eastlake Community Council offers the following comments on the Roosevelt-to-Downtown High-Capacity Transit study. Whatever its outcome, the RDHCT project will affect Eastlake deeply and we are glad to see that some of our prior comments are reflected in the latest design proposals.

We particularly appreciate retention of the center turn lane, a format which reduces the chance of head-on and rear-end collisions, maintains access for Eastlake's residents and businesses, protects pedestrians who are crossing, and provides a place for trucks to stop for loading.

ECC is supportive in principle of protected one-way bicycle lanes, although below we ask SDOT to study an alternative that could obviate the need for the southbound bicycle lane for a six-block segment of Eastlake Avenue between Edgar and Howe streets.

We look forward to further iterations of the RDHCT proposals and to further public events in Eastlake as the planning and design move forward. Please do everything you can to ensure consideration and, if possible, adoption of the following suggestions.

Public outreach process

For this comment letter, ECC appreciates the extension of time received from you and in your absence, further extended by Benjamin Smith. Still, ECC is concerned that the previously announced July 7 deadline gave too short a period for public comments after the June 15-16 open houses. The open house materials were not posted on-line until shortly after the meetings, and then the time allowed for additional public comment was

less than three weeks, a period that included the July 4 holiday when many would be out of town.

We continue to request that SDOT begin to hold actual public meetings in this process. The June 15 Eastlake event began with an SDOT presentation to all that allowed only limited questions from the public and no real discussion to be heard by all those attending. It quickly adjourned to an open house format surrounding drawings of several different segments of the corridor, each staffed with a consultant. This open house format allowed some valuable in-depth discussion one-on-one. But because of the large attendance and the crowd noise, only one or a few people at a time could hear what the consultants were saying, with the result of waiting, repetition and a lack of cumulative discussion.

The public meeting format is as old as our republic. As symbolized by the classic town meeting, members of the public engage with officials (or their consultants) in a way that they can be heard by all. The open house format's advantage of focusing on different corridor segments may recommend it for parts of a public meeting, but a public meeting's agenda can also effectively address different corridor segments in a way that all who are present can hear. A hybrid format is possible with simultaneous public discussions of different corridors; but special measures (such as amplification or separate rooms) are needed to ensure that group discussion is audible to all within each "break-out group."

SDOT has put considerable resources into gatherings that are not open to the public, such as invitation-only stakeholder focus groups and walking tours. While such activities can be valuable, it is basic for SDOT to organize meetings that are open to all. A publicly advertised walking tour or on-site visit can also be a form of public meeting.

The RDHCT project is not slated for full implementation until 2021. ECC is concerned that SDOT's remaining timetable would limit public input largely to being on-line, with few further public events as opportunities for public dialogue. ECC believes that at this early stage, the City and the RDHCT study need the benefit of multiple opportunities for public and stakeholder concerns to be broached and discussed; and that SDOT owes these opportunities to the public.

Public meetings, and open houses with public meeting features, allow for more in-depth understanding and dialogue than does restricting the public to providing comments on-line. The roll maps that are posted on-line are extremely difficult to view and understand on the average computer screen. Their file size makes on-line rendering slow and difficult to truly analyze. Being able to review these maps and design features on large printed maps and with members of the project team present is dramatically more productive than just opening and viewing these maps on-line.

Also, public events allow individuals in the communities affected by this project to talk with one another and with members of the project team to help identify problems and

solutions in real time. No on-line forum offers this kind of in-depth iterative and communicative deliberation.

Given that much of what is being proposed in the RDHCT study cannot be in place before 2021, ECC urges SDOT to build into the interim period additional and regular opportunities for public comment. SDOT should commit to an annual review to address whether the proposed design is still preferable or whether any changes have occurred (such as those from the substantial growth in Eastlake and other communities in the corridor) that should alter the optimal design. This process should involve both internal review and opportunities for public comment to reflect on the evolution of existing conditions.

ECC is concerned that the 2021 target for implementing the RDHCT study passes up opportunities for nearer-term improvements. While we understand the longer timetable of some other parts of the bus rapid transit network and of new light rail stations, five years is just too long to wait for some of the discussed improvements. Already, Eastlake's buses are bogged down in mixed traffic without the advantages of queue jumps, signal priority, and other "targeted investments" that could quickly improve bus performance. With a rapidly growing population and job base, Eastlake has an urgent need for improvements in transit speed and reliability. We request that SDOT give high priority to early "quick wins" that improve bus service far in advance of the final implementation date in 2021.

SDOT's failure to prioritize or even to consider near-term improvements does not seem responsive to the conditions under which the Mayor and City Council authorized funding for the RDHCT study in the July 15, 2013 Ordinance 124222. That ordinance's Attachment D "Eastlake Corridor Transit and Street Improvements" requires:

This project will develop and implement a range of transit and street improvements in the Eastlake Avenue corridor connecting the University District, Eastlake and South Lake Union neighborhoods between Downtown and the Roosevelt Link light rail transit station area. ... This project will identify, prioritize, design and construct the highest priority 'speed and reliability' improvements to existing bus service without excluding the potential for longer-term implementation of High Capacity Transit options. The project will also consider an improved right of way profile to best accommodate the corridor's multi-modal demands, along with the recommendations reflected in each of the City's adopted modal transportation plans and the respective neighborhood plans.

Bus speed and reliability

ECC is also concerned about the current and future speed and reliability of bus transit in this corridor. Because no other bus routes or light rail travel through Eastlake, our neighborhood is highly dependent on route 70 Metro buses. The current RDHCT design

concept involves buses traveling in mixed traffic for the vast majority of the corridor, and this heightens the importance of correctly designing and implementing the “targeted investments” in key areas where mixed traffic could bog down a bus.

In particular, we are concerned about northbound buses traveling through South Lake Union and through the area immediately south of the University Bridge. For southbound buses, we are concerned about the area north of the University Bridge up to 45th Street as well as at the intersections of Fairview Avenue N. with Valley Street and Mercer Street. Mixed traffic congestion in any one of these areas will likely create significant bus delays and overall unreliability (as is seen currently with Metro route 70 where a stack of up to four buses is not uncommon). ECC has written separately to Metro and SDOT about the problems with route 70, and that letter is attached (it is also reprinted on page 15 of the summer 2016 *Eastlake News*, available on-line).

We encourage SDOT to bring to the community additional ideas for easing the flow of bus traffic through these areas. Just south of the University Bridge, please examine the implications of extending the “queue jump” or transit-only lane south of Allison Street. Because mixed traffic often backs up south of Allison St. during peak times, it is necessary to provide the bus a means of staying on schedule. In South Lake Union, it is important to ensure that the bus receives priority at the intersection of Fairview Avenue N. and Mercer Street and on the streets approaching that intersection. SDOT should consider allocating a transit-only lane or a longer queue jump so that the bus does not get caught up in the queue trying to get onto I-5.

Additionally, because the bus will move in only one mixed-traffic lane in Eastlake, we are concerned that all traffic will slow considerably in order to account for bus dwell times at each stop. The effect will be to slow down other vehicular traffic, including any buses that are approaching. The location of bus stations could matter in enhancing mixed traffic flow. Where the curb could be moved further from the center line, stations might also be designed to allow the bus to pull in and out of traffic. While we encourage consideration of new bus stop locations and designs, we are counting on SDOT to consult with us and the public about any such changes.

We also continue to be concerned about the effects of turning traffic on the flow of mixed traffic, including the bus. Any traffic turning off of Eastlake Avenue will have to cross both a bike lane and a pedestrian crosswalk, and left-turns will also have to cross a lane of traffic. With increased density in the neighborhood and increased use of bicycle facilities, we expect there to be significantly more bicyclists and pedestrians in the future. While a member of the project team told us that the modeling software takes this trend into account, we wish to learn more about the estimated number of bicyclists and pedestrians and how much and how often they would slow turning traffic.

Issues with the proposed northbound station near Lynn Street

Many in our neighborhood are concerned about the feasibility of the proposed location just south of Lynn Street for a northbound bus station. Lynn Street is a major route eastward toward I-5 and Capitol Hill. Northbound on Eastlake Avenue, a great many drivers turn right onto Lynn St., a movement that would place them directly across the path of a northbound bus leaving the station. This conflict will not be good either for bus service or for traffic flow.

While we realize that locating the bus station just north of Lynn Street is challenging because of business driveways there, we urge that continued efforts be made to mitigate these concerns. Altering the station design so that the bus pulls in and out of traffic might make more feasible the site north of Lynn St. Perhaps one or more of the building owners could even be induced to change the driveway entrance.

Save planted median north of Allison Street by redesigning the gateway triangle

ECC is emphatically opposed to removing the landscaped boulevard strip with seven mature trees that is in the center lane of Eastlake Avenue just north of Allison Street. This planted median was a major achievement of the Eastlake Neighborhood Plan as a part of establishing a north gateway to the neighborhood. Along with it came two smaller planted medians that are at the northern end of the block near Harvard Avenue E. We are counting on these two medians (which together have seven trees) also to remain. SDOT's current concept is to remove the median and trees entirely to make room for a bus lane and station. However, in recent days ECC has found SDOT staff and consultants receptive to exploring with us and with other public agencies a reconfiguration of part this block that would save the median by an eastward move of the east sidewalk, the proposed northbound protected bike lane, and part of the proposed transit station and lane into the "north gateway" triangle of land that is bounded by Eastlake and Harvard avenues and Allison Street.

The north gateway triangle is an estimated 1.5 acres of land owned by WSDOT and managed by SDOT that formerly had homes and businesses that were taken and destroyed for construction of I-5. The 1998 Eastlake Neighborhood Plan established the following vision for this land: "To create an attractive, identifiable entrance or gateway to the adjoining neighborhoods."

The Eastlake Community Council wishes to work with City agencies and WSDOT on a public process to redesign the north gateway triangle, which is currently underused and neglected. It is now occupied by Seattle Fire Department station 22 (temporary as it awaits construction of a new building at its 901 E. Roanoke Street); an SDOT/Pronto bike station; and paving, granite walls, and landscaping that WSDOT installed upon the 1962 opening of I-5.

The proposed redesign of the north gateway triangle would save the planted median by making sufficient room further east for transit improvements, the northbound bicycle lane, and a relocated sidewalk. It would include a better designed park (possibly illuminated with LEDs as is Counterbalance Park in lower Queen Anne) with a multi-use space suitable for open air markets, concerts, and other public events which would actually benefit from being sheltered by I-5 from the rain. This new space would be designed to accommodate motor vehicle parking, and part of it would normally be used for public parking of motor vehicles. This new public parking area would very partially offset the 323 public parking spaces that SDOT proposes to remove from Eastlake Avenue as part of the RDHCT project.

The electric, water, and sewer lines that were recently installed to serve the temporary fire station could be re-used to serve a bicycle shop at the site to provide expert repairs and also some space and tools for self-repairs by members of the public. A café might also be included. A public planning process would explore these and other opportunities for the site, including a signature art piece and which of the current landscape plantings to keep and what new landscaping to do.

A redesign of the north gateway triangle looks to be a win-win project, enabling the RDHCT project to save the much-loved planted median and its trees; and to create some new parking to offset some of the on-street parking that is proposed to be eliminated. The redesign could also energize the north gateway triangle by creating an event space as well as services for those passing through (especially bicyclists) as well as for those who live or work in the neighborhood. ECC looks forward to working with City agencies and WSDOT to make this project happen.

Left turn restrictions

Businesses and residents in Eastlake and the Portage Bay neighborhood are concerned about SDOT's proposal to prohibit left turns at Fuhrman Avenue East both northbound and southbound from Eastlake Avenue. Eliminating the southbound left turn from the University Bridge will bring constant traffic onto the non-arterial Allison Street, splitting the north gateway triangle from its south open space and pathways that extend further south. This traffic will continue onto narrow residential portions of Allison and possibly Gwinn and Shelby streets in the Portage Bay residential area.

Eliminating the northbound left turn onto Fuhrman Ave. E. poses different problems. Those needing to access the residences and businesses on Fairview Avenue East and the west block of Fuhrman Avenue E. will add traffic to Allison and Hamlin street and to the Fairview Avenue E. Green Street, whose fast cut-through traffic is already a problem. Compounding the problem is that, unlike the gradual slope of Fuhrman Avenue E., Allison and Hamlin streets (the only other routes to between Eastlake Ave. and this part

of Fairview Avenue E.) are unusually steep... Denying a northbound left turn onto Fuhrman may be particularly problematic for trucks trying to reach marine businesses on Fairview Avenue E., and could pose a challenge for all residents and businesses during times of snow and ice.

ECC recognizes the complexity of this intersection and the many competing needs for this right of way. However, ECC is concerned that the consequences of eliminating the northbound or southbound left turns may be unacceptable and have not been adequately explored or discussed with the affected residents and businesses. We ask SDOT to conduct and share with us additional engineering efforts to continue the existing left turns and center turn lane. For example, could any potential delay to buses from keeping the center turn lane with a left turn traffic signal cycle be substantially reduced by the buses' use of signal priority? We also encourage SDOT to conduct outreach to the residents and businesses that would be affected by elimination of the northbound and southbound left turns. These efforts would include development of an access plan to address their needs should the left turns be eliminated.

ECC wishes to be assured by SDOT that no other left turn restrictions to and from Eastlake Avenue are contemplated. In response to our previous inquiry, SDOT wrote on January 28, "[t]he project will provide left-turn lanes at all locations where left-turn demand meets thresholds for dedicated turn lanes. The analysis will consider both existing traffic levels and changes in traffic volumes and operations because of the project." Please let us know what numerical threshold you may have in mind, and how it applies to the number of left turns you have recorded and projected at the intersections along Eastlake Avenue. With Eastlake residences and jobs rapidly increasing in number, we believe that left turns to and from Eastlake Avenue are now well above necessary thresholds, and will increase substantially in the future. Please propose no further left turn restrictions.

Pedestrian Improvements

While the design and discussion have focused on transit and bicycle infrastructure, ECC is also concerned about pedestrian improvements. SDOT's January 28 letter stated, "[t]he project is considering design treatments that will improve pedestrian crossings through the introduction of new pedestrian crossing phases and geometric changes at signalized intersections, inclusion of pedestrian median refuges, and extensions of the sidewalk, as possible." We would be grateful for details on the design treatments being considered, and where they would be proposed.

ECC is particularly concerned about improving safety in pedestrian crossings of Eastlake Avenue at East Newton Street. Eastlake Avenue at this point is sloped and curved, increasing downhill speeds and making pedestrians hard to see. ECC has communicated repeatedly with SDOT about this dangerous intersection without any

improvements made. As called for by the Eastlake Neighborhood Plan, ECC recommends a traffic signal and possibly also a raised crosswalk.

Bicycle Infrastructure Planning

Eastlake Avenue has long been an unsafe route for bicyclists. The amount of collisions involving bicycles identified in the Existing Conditions Report should not be tolerated in a city with a stated policy of Vision Zero. Protected bicycle lanes along at least part of Eastlake Avenue seem necessary to meaningfully increase safety for bicyclists.

That said, ECC wishes to be assured that SDOT and the project team have fully examined north-south bicycle routes through the Eastlake neighborhood that would not use Eastlake Avenue. Given the limited right-of-way on Eastlake Ave. itself, the possibility of locating safe and easily usable bicycle routes on other north-south streets could offer tremendous benefits. The 1998 Eastlake Neighborhood Plan called for designation of Minor Avenue East as a bicycle route, but SDOT opposed this step on the grounds that Eastlake and Fairview avenues were already designated routes and that “Signing Minor will not likely be sufficient encouragement to cause bicyclists to switch routes.” (p. 40 of the 1999 Approval and Adoption Matrix) SDOT needs to rethink its response.

Eastlake resident Mike Francisco, former member of the Seattle Bicycle Advisory Board, has proposed to SDOT (see also his article on page 15 of the summer 2016 Eastlake News, on-line) that to keep some on-street parking in Eastlake’s central business district, the southbound protected bicycle lane on Eastlake Avenue be dispensed with between Edgar and Howe Streets in favor of directing bicyclists onto other north-south streets like Yale Place East, Yale Avenue East, and Minor and Fairview avenues.

We urge that SDOT explore this option fully, along with bicycle routes on other north-south streets besides Eastlake Avenue. Many bicyclists currently prefer these north-south side streets, where they are safer than on Eastlake Avenue.

As ECC mentioned in a prior letter, we encourage SDOT to consider bicycle parking as part of its ongoing planning for this corridor. While SDOT responded in its February 19 letter that “[a]ny citizen, business, or group can request an SDOT provided bike rack,” we nonetheless believe that this type of planning is best done in conjunction with the RDHCT study’s broader planning for bicycle infrastructure. A participatory process can best determine the optimal locations for bicycle parking, especially given that the pedestrian environment often overlaps with bicycle parking areas. When new bike lanes open for use, it is important to have bicycle parking already in place, and at locations that are carefully planned.

ECC is concerned about the current design plans for bicycles in the area just south of the University Bridge. This is a complicated area, with bicyclists merging between Harvard Ave. and Eastlake Ave., and many motorists turning to the east in front of them. There is a history of bicycle collisions, even fatal ones. Southbound cyclists must have a safe path from the far SW corner of the University Bridge to cross traffic to reach Harvard Avenue. Possible measures include bike boxes, a signed route to a crosswalk, and a dedicated bicycle turn lane. The design presented at the June 15-16 open houses does not adequately address this safety problem. We encourage further planning and dialogue.

Cut-Through Traffic

In a prior letter, ECC called attention to existing cut-through traffic by motorists avoiding Eastlake Avenue, and expressed concern that this problem would worsen as a result of the RDHCT changes to Eastlake Ave. In response, SDOT noted that, “[t]he scope of the Roosevelt to Downtown HCT Study does not extend to solving existing traffic problems, but seeks to provide efficient movement in the future. In terms of preventing diversion to neighborhood streets in the future with the implementation of BRT, there are traffic calming measures that can be used to minimize the use of neighborhood streets by through traffic.”

This SDOT response is not sustainable. It is essential for the RDHCT study to consider and solve the ever-worsening cut-through traffic that parallels Eastlake Avenue. Otherwise, an alternative could be chosen with huge unanticipated negative consequences that would become clear only after implementation, when it is too late to build in an effective solution.

We believe that this worst-case scenario may now be happening. Cut-through traffic is already at unacceptable levels, and the RDHCT changes to Eastlake Avenue will clearly worsen it. But SDOT is not modeling these impacts nor developing a comprehensive strategy to address them. SDOT must stop ignoring the cut-through traffic problem and must make its solution a central part of the RDHCT proposals.

And as with the disappointing omission of near-term improvements in existing bus service, the lack of concern for cut-through traffic is contrary to the requirements of Ordinance 124222, whose Attachment D “Eastlake Corridor Transit and Street Improvements” requires SDOT to make use of recommendations in the “respective neighborhood plans.” The Eastlake Neighborhood Plan (available on the City and ECC web sites) extensively details the problems of cut-through traffic on Fairview Avenue East. In January 2016, ECC submitted the Fairview Green Street design concept plan (available at <http://eastlakeseattle.org/?page=Fairview>) to SDOT and OPCD for their review prior to its adoption as a joint director’s rule.

Conclusion

We again thank SDOT and the project team for their efforts to improve transportation in and through Eastlake. No neighborhood will be as deeply affected as ours by the Roosevelt to Downtown High Capacity Transit project. We look forward to the further analyses and public processes that are needed to ensure that the project is best for all parties, including our neighborhood's residents and businesses.

Sincerely,



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cc: Mayor, City Council