



O-017-001

725 South Sego Lily Drive
P.O. Box 265
Keyesville, UT 84037
Tel: (801) 593-8969

Planning Office:
4870 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84322-4870
Tel: (435) 797-0446
FAX: (435) 797-8015

www.utahbotanicalcenter.org



Paul Krueger
WSDOT Environmental Manager
SR 520 Project Office
414 Olive Way, Suite 400
Seattle, WA 98101

Dear Mr. Krueger:

The Utah Botanical Center learns with alarm of proposals being put forward by the Washington State Department of Transportation with regard to the replacement of the SR 520 floating bridge and its effects on adjacent roads and lands on the western shores of Lake Washington in Seattle. We refer especially to the impact on Washington Park Arboretum, which stewards a number of valuable tree collections of international significance. Current bridge construction that would take Arboretum land, sacrifice indispensable collections, and threaten wetland habitat need to be re-assessed in light of what is at risk. We therefore wish to comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement made available on www.SR520DEIScomments.com.

The layout of this Arboretum represents a significant cultural landscape, having been designed by the renowned Frederick Law Olmsted landscape architecture firm at the beginning of the last century as a crucial component of their vision for the boulevard and park network for Seattle. The Arboretum now forms the southern limb of UW Botanic Gardens (www.uwbotanicgardens.org) which also include sensitive shoreline wetlands and a nature reserve (Union Bay Natural Area), and the Union Bay Gardens surrounding Merrill Hall (Center for Urban Horticulture) to the north of SR520. The Arboretum alone is the largest open green space in the central metropolitan area of Seattle and provides an invaluable park experience for local people as well as visitors to the city, attracting 250,000 visitors a year.

The Arboretum is the *only* botanical institution in Washington to be officially designated a State Arboretum. The tree collections are in the very top tier of North American botanic gardens and arboreta, and have international significance to the preservation of biodiversity and our horticultural heritage. Among these well-documented holdings, the North American Plant Collections Consortium, a major new conservation and stewardship initiative of the American Public Gardens Association have recognized the Arboretum's collections of oaks, maples, and hollices. It is our firm contention, therefore, that any development that impinges on this national treasure must be assessed with the greatest care and consideration for future generations.

This is not a new struggle for the Arboretum. In the 1960s, the northern part of the Arboretum and the Montlake neighborhood was sliced through east-west by SR 520. Only after huge public process were plans for a further highway running north-south through the Arboretum abandoned. Proposals on the table today present an equally dismaying series of options, which, if implemented, will adversely impact the most ecologically sensitive parts of the Arboretum, notably the wetlands lying at their heart. Furthermore, currently the elevation of SR 520 lies largely at a low level near the Arboretum. Proposals include raising it to 50-70 feet above the waterline [DEIS p. 5-7], which will cause a significantly increased visual intrusion into more of the Botanic Gardens.

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Comment Summary:

Arboretum (Concerns)

Response:

See Section 9.3 of the 2006 Draft EIS Comment Response Report.

One alternative now proposed [DEIS p. 5-27] includes a 400-foot wide "footprint" over the western approaches to the Arboretum. Another option [DEIS p. 5-32] calls for a large intersection over the wetlands and, from that, a 200-foot high bridge leading northwards to the main campus of the University. This major intersection in the heart of the Botanic Gardens would funnel increased [DEIS 5-32] traffic down into the present-day northern part of the Arboretum then onto Lake Washington Boulevard, one of the Olmsted's most important thoroughfares in Seattle. The impact on the Arboretum and its users as a whole would be devastating.

We are concerned that construction will take 4.5 years [DEIS p. 8-10] and involve the building of a temporary bridge on Arboretum land, but that no meaningful traffic plan through the Arboretum for the construction period has been presented [p. 8-8]. We also learn that, despite requests by most neighborhood communities to have commissioned an independent assessment of alternative construction modes, notably a tube-tunnel option, those requests have not been entertained.

We believe strongly that an independent study should be commissioned to assess the effects of such a system and thoroughly examine alternative construction modes, such as a tube-tunnel, be developed. Viable alternatives should not involve an out-of-proportion scale of the proposed developments and their detrimental visual impact, the shading of the Arboretum, traffic noise, and the effects on salmon passing through waters surrounded by the Botanic Gardens. Implementation of such a scheme would also allow not only the Arboretum to be returned to the original Olmsted vision, but also restore tranquility to the Botanic Gardens as a whole - as well as to the adjoining neighborhoods.

The Utah Botanical Center, owned and operated by Utah State University, had its original site taken by the Utah Department of Transportation with no regard for the significant, cumulative educational, botanical, and aesthetic value of the facility. It saddens me to learn of another potential significant taking by the Washington Department of Transportation. The impact of these actions to cultural, botanical, and educational resources is incalculable.

The integrity of the Washington Park Arboretum and its association with the University of Washington and its valuable collections, green space, and wildlife habitat in a major metropolitan city should be preserved. In the national interest, we urge you to consider these issues.

Respectfully,



David Anderson
Associate Director