



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

Dear Mr. Krueger:

O-026-001

Olbrich Botanical Gardens has learned that the Washington State Department of Transportation is placing a new bridge that will negatively impact the Washington Park Arboretum. Bridge construction would take Arboretum land and sacrifice indispensable collections as well as threaten wetland habitat. Our garden wishes to comment on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement made available on www.SR520DEIScomments.com.

The Washington Park Arboretum (Arboretum) represents a significant cultural landscape, having been designed by the renowned Frederick Law Olmsted landscape architecture firm at the beginning of the 20th century. It was a crucial component of their vision for the boulevard and park network for Seattle. The Arboretum is the southern section of the University of Washington Botanic Gardens (www.uwbotanicgardens.org) which also includes shoreline wetlands, a nature reserve (Union Bay Natural Area), and Union Bay Gardens at the Center for Urban Horticulture located to the north of SR520. The Arboretum is the largest open green space in the central metropolitan area of Seattle and provides an invaluable park experience for the local population as well as visitors to the city with more than 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 Arboretum's collections of oaks, maples, and hollies have been recognized by the North American Plant Collections Consortium -- a conservation and stewardship initiative of the American Public Gardens Association. 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 its 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 [DESIS 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 commission an independent assessment of alternative construction modes, notably a tube-tunnel option, those requests have not been entertained.

We believe 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 integrity of the Washington Park Arboretum 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.

Sincerely,


Roberta Sladky, Director
Olbrich Botanical Gardens

