

Comments regarding the Visual Quality and Aesthetics Discipline Report contained in the SR520 Bridge Replacement SDEIS

April 9, 2010

I-232-001 | The Visual Quality and Aesthetics Discipline Report (VQADR) begins with the statement that "The construction and modification of our roadways, which are publicly owned, can considerably affect the quality and character of the landscape". Living as we do in one of the most beautiful natural settings encompassing a metropolitan area, this statement should remind us, as we contemplate building one of the area's largest and most expensive physical structures, that design quality and sensitivity to the landscape should be paramount concerns.

I-232-002 | As a Montlake resident and former director of the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington, I have watched with interest and trepidation as various options for SR520 have been explored. As a member of the Seattle Arts Commission for 6 years, I also represented the Commission on the Light Rail Review Committee. This committee reviewed the station designs as proposed by Sound Transit, providing input on aesthetics and design issues. As is the case with SR520, the design parameters of the light rail stations were necessarily constrained by engineering requirements. However, Sound Transit wisely sought to balance engineering concerns with aesthetic interests and conducted design competitions for the individual stations. The result is a series of stations that are functional and beautiful.

I-232-003 | While the VQADR provides a dispassionate and lengthy analysis of the effects of the bridge options on the visual quality and character in the 520 corridor, the conclusions (like the photographs in the illustrations) are made at such a distance that it is, in fact, very difficult to make an informed judgment about the aesthetic impact of the designs. A constructed object of this scale is too large to be considered from a single vantage point and the report appropriately selects numerous vantage points for analysis, using the Federal Highway Administration visual quality assessment method. The problem with this approach is that it neglects, in the end, to consider the design as a whole. If one thinks about great bridge experiences, while in transit or viewed at a distance, it is the design as a whole that registers, something much more than the sum of individual vignettes.

I-232-004 | Little in the report suggests that the design of the bridge will be the result of a design competition or other effort to ensure that the team responsible for building the structure, one we will drive on and look at for generations, is concerned as much about the enduring quality of the design, as the

I-232-001

The State will apply the principles of Context Sensitive Design/Solutions (CSD/S) in the design of the new facilities. In addition, the design and aesthetics of the new facilities will be reviewed by the Seattle Design Commission.

I-232-002

While some local jurisdictions dedicate a percentage of their project budgets for art, WSDOT has no such dedicated funding. Section 40 of the State Constitution specifies that gas tax money must be used for a "highway purpose." Therefore, public art beyond WSDOT standard design is typically funded by other sources. To read the WSDOT policy on art within public works projects for which WSDOT is the lead agency please refer to the Design Manual, Section 1360:
<http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/publications/manuals/fulltext/M22-01/2007AugustSupplement.pdf>

I-232-003

The analysis method uses landscape units, which are comprised of the individual viewpoints, to then objectively analyze the overall impacts to visual quality and aesthetics.

I-232-004

Comment noted; it would be unfortunate to have a floating bridge that diminished the visual quality of the Lake Washington viewshed.

- I-232-004** | enduring elements of the construction. After all the years of discussion, it would be an appalling turn of events to build the floating equivalent of the Alaskan Way Viaduct on Lake Washington. The report's illustrations of a new floating bridge sitting on ten-foot tall columns and extending 22 feet higher than the current bridge (not including sound and view blocking walls) uncomfortably echo the profile of the Viaduct. A positive comment tucked in the report, suggesting that boater's views will be improved by the elevated structure, is a bit like saying that pedestrians on First Avenue in some parts of downtown Seattle have a nice view of Elliot Bay, neglecting the fact that pedestrians a bit farther uphill have a splendid view of elevated concrete.
- I-232-005** | If Option A is the current frontrunner, there are significant visual quality and aesthetic impacts to be considered:

The expanded breadth of the bridge and the interchange would, as noted in the report, significantly reduce open space and restrict views in the Portage Bay and Montlake landscape units, particularly if sound walls extend the height of the highway and ramps.
- I-232-006** | The report states: "If the design of the Portage Bay Bridge is noteworthy and architecturally appropriate in terms of style and scale for the setting, vividness and unity would remain high, and intactness could increase. On the other hand, a design that does not consider style or scale may adversely affect visual quality". So, how is this design quality to be guaranteed? Who will champion this necessary design quality?
- I-232-007** | The negative aesthetic impacts of the massive new interchange are considered in some detail. The lid sounds nice, but unlike Option K, divides rather than unites the adjacent communities. There is not enough detail in the VQADR to visualize the labyrinth of on and off ramps, flyover ramps, and thruway that crisscross the Portage Bay and Montlake landscape units, as well as the lid itself. There are enough cautionary comments in the report to make one uneasy about the potential for a design mess at the Montlake Intersection: intertwined car, bike, transit and HOV lanes covering a large area and only partially obscured by a lid structure.
- I-232-008** | The addition of a second bridge adjacent to the historically significant Montlake Bridge is a negative from a design standpoint as the current bridge is appropriately scaled for the Cut and can be viewed from the east and west. A second bridge will block the view from the east and undercut the visual strength of the single historic bridge. The widening of Montlake Boulevard to accommodate thousands of additional cars for the new bridge turns a boulevard into a highway ramp and does severe damage to

I-232-005

The Visual Quality and Aesthetics Discipline Report notes that although mature roadside vegetation would be removed, most of it would be replaced after construction. The effects on open space are not described as "significant" because this term is not defined or used as part of visual quality assessment methodology.

I-232-006

WSDOT is committed to adhering to guidelines and standards set for the project to meet local and state requirements and goals to ensure visual unity and consistency throughout the SR 520 corridor. See page 78-79 of the Visual Quality and Aesthetics Discipline Report in Attachment 7 to the SDEIS.

I-232-007

For a more detailed description of the options, please see Chapter 2 of the SDEIS and Final EIS, and the Description of Alternatives Discipline Report and Addendum.

I-232-008

Visualizations of Option A indicate that views of the existing bascule bridge from the east half of the Montlake Cut would not be blocked by the second bascule. Since the SDEIS was published, FHWA and WSDOT have identified a Preferred Alternative which is similar to Option A, but with a number of design refinements. The setting will change, but design of a second bascule bridge would be closely coordinated with the DAHP to ensure that the new bridge would not diminish the integrity the existing bridge as a historic property. See Chapter 2 of the Final EIS for a description of the planning process and the Preferred Alternative.

I-232-008

the visual "intactness" of one of Seattle's oldest neighborhoods, as well as the transition to the University of Washington.

I-232-009

Well designed bridges do more than go from point A to point B, they marry science and art to create a structure that adds to, not subtracts from, the beauty of the world. Every time we deposit a toll, we will be reminded that we are paying for this structure. Shouldn't it be a goal for this project that the 520 bridge is worth paying for because it looks good and is a pleasure to cross? The VQADR points out the many beautiful elements surrounding the bridge: Lake Washington, Mt. Rainier, University of Washington campus, and downtown skylines. A well-designed bridge needs to measure up to these surroundings and, perhaps, like the Golden Gate Bridge, become a source of regional pride. The financing of this bridge depends on tolls from commuters, occasional users, and tourists. There is a psychological difference between paying a fee and buying a ticket, the former feels more like a tax, the latter more like paying for an experience. The language of the VQADR is mostly that of "mitigation" (of effects along the corridor) and is strikingly lacking in aspiration for a bridge design that holds engineering and aesthetic interests as equal values. Our goal should be to create a bridge that people will want to cross, not have to cross, because the experience of traveling on the bridge, as well as viewing it from afar, are points of pride for all involved.

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I-232-009

The purpose of visual quality and aesthetics assessments is to describe the likely character and degree of 'visual effects', i.e., changes to the visual environment. The reasons that visual quality assessments are included in environmental assessments are to discover and disclose these visual effects and to identify possible mitigation approaches. A visual quality and aesthetics report is not an advocacy document; it must be objective and as dispassionate as possible. Aesthetic vision and goals are treated in documents that summarize public input, such as the Design Advisory Committee 2006.