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#### Our Mission

To build the case and constituency for lidding Interstate 5 and building a more connected, sustainable, and equitable Seattle.

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June 25, 2019

TO: Lyle Bicknell and Quanlin Hu, Seattle Office of Planning and Community Development  
CC: Dave Warner and Dhyana Quintanar, WSP  
FROM: Lid I-5 Steering Committee  
RE: Support for I-5 Lid Feasibility Work Plan

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Lyle and Quanlin,

As requested, we are submitting this comment in support of the feasibility study materials presented on June 11.

Generally, we are pleased with the consultant's team progress. The guiding principles and assumptions appear to be on track, and we are impressed at the level of interagency coordination and technical research that has already occurred. We also appreciate the detailed schedule of meetings and deliverables for the coming months. The timing of events meets our expectations.

### **Study Approach and Work Plan**

We applaud the clear statements of what the study will and will not include. They are consistent with the intentions of the public benefit funding from the Convention Center, approval of the Seattle Design Commission, and our discussions with OPCD when crafting the scope of work last year.

However, clarification is needed for the timing and form of public outreach led by the Department of Neighborhoods. Please include this at the next study meeting. We are happy to assist with promoting public events or comment periods (if any) or connecting you directly with local stakeholder groups.

In addition, please provide details on what "Next Steps" will be identified in the report. We would like to see a comprehensive list of the steps required to build lids, with estimates of duration for each part of the process, i.e. a construction Gantt chart. In the shorter term, details are needed on what the immediate next steps should be which are funded by the City, state, or grants to keep up momentum on the project.

Lastly, please include brief, high-level budget status updates at all future committee meetings. At the next meeting in particular, it would be helpful to also understand what all of the "extracurricular" expenses have been, such as the UW urban planning studio and the application for the BUILD grant.

## Guiding Principles

The broad goals are inspiring and strongly tie into the Comprehensive Plan and Imagine Greater Downtown. Expanding on the small group discussion, we offer these points to further define the specific guiding principles.

**Connectivity:** The quality of the pedestrian and bicycle environment is critical for accessible neighborhoods, and is a factor in whether and how different types of people cross the freeway (including seniors, visitors, people with disabilities, etc.). Factors include noise, weather protection, sidewalk width, landscaping, lighting, and more. In addition, while the study area has a relatively intact grid of street overpasses over the freeway, there are also gaps that could be filled by future lids. These issues might be summarized as “street experience and “mobility grid”.

**Complete community:** We suggest specifying “green open space” or “parks”, in contrast with the hardscape plazas common to the Center City. In addition, “community center” or, more generally, “public meeting place” needs to be emphasized, as the study area lacks a true public community center to gather, recreate, and host family-friendly events.

**Equity:** Equity considerations include the heavy share of multifamily buildings and renter households in the area, who live with less open space than lower-density areas of Seattle. These residents live far from Seattle’s major parks like Seward and Discovery, where recreation opportunities abound. Equity also includes the environmental impacts – the freeway users, who tend to be relatively affluent suburban commuters, cause more air and water pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and noise than the urban residents who walk, bike, and take transit around the freeway.

**Health:** We recommend adding “recreation”, “healthy food access”, and “civic/social life” as important components of health that could be facilitated by new land uses on future lids.

**Identity, Affordability, and Sustainability & Resilience:** These guiding principles look complete.

## Physical Assumptions

The physical planning assumptions are sound and a reasonable basis. The critical issue of ramp and overpass configuration is openly addressed, and we agree that those structures should be open to modification or removal for the purposes of this study. We concur that a traffic analysis of the implications of any ramp changes should be reserved for a future phase of study - this current phase should first focus on the immense land use and public benefit opportunities, particularly in the area south of Seneca Street. The ramps north of Pike Street are more reasonable to leave in place due to their shape and location.

Specific areas of consideration follow.

**Spring Street On-Ramp:** The Spring Street on-ramp is a barrier to a complete Madison-Spring lid which seals off the sights, sounds, and pollution of the freeway below. The ramp also hampers pedestrian mobility. A full lid will be a greater public benefit with more flexible land use and design options.

The removal of the on-ramp ramp should be included in the study scenarios. Again, traffic analysis does not need to occur, but we note that alternatives exist if a future phase of study determines this connection would need to be replaced

- Concept 1: There is a nearby ramp five blocks south at Jefferson Street via 6th Avenue. The Jefferson Street on-ramp accesses the same collector-distributor lanes. This alternative routing requires no change in the number of turns on city streets.
- Concept 2: The ramp could be moved into a tunnel with a portal on Spring Street between 5th Avenue and 6th Avenue, similar to the portals for the Columbia/Cherry and Mercer ramps. This would have the additional benefit of eliminating the conflict with buses headed eastbound to First Hill.

In addition, a brief exploration of reworking the nearby Madison street off-ramp might be included. The current connection to surface streets and the pedestrian network are not optimal, especially in the context of the planned Madison Bus Rapid Transit route.

**Seneca Street Off-Ramp:** The Spring-Seneca block is a critical lid opportunity and has an existing portion of Freeway Park. The Seneca Street off-ramp is a barrier to a complete lid and park expansion which seals off the sights, sounds, and pollution of the freeway below. The ramp also hampers pedestrian mobility. A full lid will be a greater public benefit with more flexible land use and design options.

The removal of the off-ramp should be included in the study scenarios. We note that alternatives exist if a future phase of study determines this connection would need to be replaced. For context, this exit is from the mainline whereas the two nearby exits at James Street and Madison Street serve the collector-distributor lanes.

- Concept 1: Exiting mainline traffic could be directed to the collector-distributor lanes in advance, south of the I-90 interchange (a crossover already exists at Atlantic Street).
- Concept 2: The Spring Street off-ramp could be shortened and raised to connect at Madison Street, either at the overpass midpoint or at the 6th Avenue intersection.
- Concept 3: The ramp could be moved into a tunnel that exits at one of several locations in Downtown, similar to the tunnel portals for the Columbia/Cherry and Mercer ramps.
- Concept 4: A new east-side flyover could be created between Marion and Columbia Streets to merge with the existing Madison Street off-ramp at 7th Avenue.

**Freeway Park:** Regarding the assumption about internal modifications to existing lids: Now is the opportunity to analyze the challenges and opportunities of filling in the gap in Freeway Park between University and Union Streets. This area may leverage the park's full potential for flat, useable open space for people to use while addressing the park's traffic noise. On the other hand, if left open this area may serve as an important natural ventilation asset for a multi-block tunnel. We encourage the study team to analyze this area in coordination with Seattle Parks and Recreation, the Freeway Park Association, and WSDOT.

To the extent necessary to develop the most complete and useable lid area possible and to expand Freeway Park southward, the study team should analyze the demolition of the inaccessible park elements in this block. Consideration of where people camping in this area would be relocated, and/or what social services would be made available, should be noted. The Naramore Fountain is on solid ground and should remain in perpetuity. The “box garden” element of Freeway Park, which forms a pleasant landscape buffer for pedestrians and a gateway for motorists, should be assumed to be replicated south of Madison Street in some form (design details to be determined in a later phase of work).

Demolition of existing lid park structures has significant precedent: the Penn’s Landing project in Philadelphia is demolishing an existing 1.8 acre lid park (also originally built in 1976) in order to make way for a new, modern lid park. The project will improve pedestrian connectivity and expand public land use opportunities.

**I-5 Express Lanes:** The express lanes are a unique feature of the freeway and should be paid particular attention. In the study area they are sunk below grade but are mostly open to the ambient air, with the exception of an actual tunnel between Olive Way and Denny Way. The tunnel ventilation stack will need to be raised when a lid is built in the area. Elsewhere the need for tunnel systems should be studied for the life safety needs specific to express lane travelers.

## Economic and Land Use Assumptions

We would like clarification on the assumption that revenue-generating and commercial uses cannot occupy interstate right-of-way. If this is true it has clearly been overcome in many cases:

- Capitol Crossing over I-395 in Washington, D.C. (some two million square feet of office, retail, and restaurants)
- Walgreens over I-80 in Reno, NV ([map](#))
- Several retail “oases” over freeways in the Chicago area ([map](#))
- McDonalds over I-44 in Vinita, OK ([map](#))
- Convention centers in Seattle, Detroit, and Kansas City

The broader study area based on census tracts is reasonable. We encourage the team to use the demographic and economic data from this area to focus on public need and market-demand for various land uses. This includes the full spectrum of facilities like parks, schools, community centers, fire stations, utilities and livability needs like grocery stores, restaurants, small-scale retail, and healthcare.

We want to note a special need for including a public community center in the structural loading scenarios. The Belltown Community Center is closing due to an expired lease, the Miller Community Center is far from the core of Capitol Hill and Downtown, and densely populated First Hill lacks a dedicated public meeting space.

## Equity Considerations

Any displacement analysis of capital investment – which may be premature given the conceptual nature of this study – will likely confirm the risk is low. There are few remaining redevelopment opportunities in the study area that would be associated with physical displacement. Economic displacement is a minimal concern because market rents have been high in the Center City for many years.

Further, a large share of affordable housing in the study area is in public or non-profit ownership, and thus is not vulnerable to the effects of market forces. Ultimately, the lids themselves are an opportunity to create sites for affordable housing, and may contribute a net benefit for housing.

## **Conclusion**

Thank you for consideration of our comments on the study's guiding principles and early assumptions. We sincerely hope they are helpful in building the outcome of the study and creating public benefits for all. Please don't hesitate to get in touch with any questions.

Best regards,

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