January 19, 2010

The Honorable Mike McGinn  
Mayor, City of Seattle  
600 Fourth Avenue, Floor 7  
Seattle, WA 98104  

Re: Elliott Bay Seawall Repair Financing Plan  

Dear Mayor McGinn,  

Thank you for your recent proposal regarding the Elliott Bay Seawall. The safety of citizens and property in this city is the most critical and urgent concern for all elected officials. Challenges come in different guises and on unknowable schedules, while Seattle, like all cities, has limited resources. It is for these reasons we take the issue of Seattle’s seawall deterioration seriously and welcome you to the planning for its efficient replacement. In light of your announcement regarding a possible bond measure we thought it important to engage as early as possible. This letter details concerns and ideas for moving forward.  

The Council is committed to having a comprehensive and integrated plan for funding all elements of the Alaskan Way Viaduct and Seawall Replacement Project (Project) for which the city is responsible, not just one component of the Project. While you noted in your press comments that your seawall proposal is “not about the Viaduct,” the work must take place in the same area and will impact the same businesses impacted by removing the viaduct structure and building a great waterfront boulevard. A comprehensive project plan must be developed in consultation and cooperation with waterfront stakeholders including the Port of Seattle, the State, the County and also adjacent property and business owners.  

The work on the Alaskan Way Seawall Interim Repairs project, approved by the Council in the adopted 2006 Capital Improvement Program, to extend the seawall’s life until it is replaced is virtually completed, and there is ongoing monitoring of the seawall. In November 2009, SDOT issued a request for qualifications from seawall design teams and should have received responses earlier this month. With request for qualification responses from design firms just received, it is
premature to suggest we have a reliable price tag or project scope. Last fall during budget review, SDOT presented an overall Project schedule showing that the bulk of the work for the seawall replacement is expected to start in 2013 with substantial completion scheduled for late 2015. You have recently expressed the need for urgent action, including a special election in May 2010 to seek voter approval of bonds. Have you received recent information that causes you to recommend modifications to the seawall replacement schedule presented by SDOT? If so, please provide Council with that information.

The Council has set a schedule and process for adopting a comprehensive financing plan for the Project. Our commitment to carry this out is reflected in two Statements of Legislative Intent (SLIs) adopted by the Council last fall. These SLIs specifically requested that the Executive report back to Council with a detailed assessment of three specific funding sources for the Project: an increase in the commercial parking tax; the creation of a Transportation Benefit District; and the formation of a Local Improvement District. The Council requested this assessment by June 1, 2010 to help develop a plan to guide proposed Project spending through 2018. We are certainly open to considering other ideas, such as a bond issue or levy, and to receiving that assessment at an earlier date, but the Council believes that it is very important that we have a comprehensive plan so that the public and elected decision-makers are fully informed about what to expect over time.

We want to make certain that the City’s Central Waterfront Partnership Committee has full opportunity to participate on this issue. The Central Waterfront Partnership Committee has held just one meeting. Legitimate questions have been raised about how to best restore some ecological function to the central waterfront shoreline as part of the seawall replacement. The Waterfront Partnership Committee should be included in any discussion about how, when, and what size of funding measures should be considered or placed on the ballot. The Committee members’ input is vital to the success of the Project.

We need to also raise concerns about whether holding a special election this spring is timely. Off-cycle elections are expensive. The last single-issue public vote over Alaskan Way Viaduct Replacement options in 2007 cost the City more than $1 million and King County confirms that we would be faced with a similar price tag on a single-issue election this May.

Lastly, before going to voters to pay for this component of the Project or to approve a comprehensive funding plan for the Project, it is critical that we complete a comprehensive strategic plan to determine what major capital projects the City can afford over the next four years, and which of these needs should be funded by measures requiring a public vote. For example, the Seattle Center Master Plan is not funded, several of our community centers are in need of major repair and renovation, and the Police Departments’ North Precinct and Harbor Patrol facilities are in clear need of replacement. The City has asked its citizens for a great deal these past few years and the people of Seattle have been very generous. Voters expect and deserve predictability and a sound financial strategy before we ask again.
With that in mind, we would like to work with you to make thoughtful and strategic decisions about what priorities we will ask voters to approve at the ballot box over the next four years. We understand that discussions are underway in various City departments to consider whether neighborhood priorities such as targeted transit connections, desired neighborhood sidewalks, safer bicycle connections and parks operations should be submitted to possible public votes for funding. These discussions are in addition to the renewal of the Family and Education Levy which is scheduled to go to voters in 2011 and your stated objective to ask the voters within two years to fund an expanded light rail system.

These decisions should be made in a comprehensive, organized, inclusive and transparent manner. The new seawall must last generations and be a sound investment ecologically and financially. We look forward to further discussions about these possibilities with you.

Sincerely,

Council President Richard Conlin

Councilmember Tim Burgess

Councilmember Jean Godden

Councilmember Nick Licata

Councilmember Sally Bagshaw

Councilmember Sally J. Clark

Councilmember Bruce A. Harrell

Councilmember Tom Rasmussen