September 30, 2008

Mercer Street Corridor Project Funding

Thank you for contacting the City Council about the Mercer Street Corridor project.

Our letter is intended to answer questions about project funding and to affirm the Council's commitment to the Mercer Corridor project and the Spokane Street Viaduct project.

Major Transportation Projects

In November 2006, Seattle voters approved “Bridging the Gap,” a property tax levy to fund street paving, bridge repair, sidewalks, bike paths and lanes, and pedestrian safety projects. All of these levy funds are allocated to making critical transportation improvements in every neighborhood in the City. We are closing the street maintenance gap and delivering on much-needed projects in neighborhoods throughout the City.

In 2007, these “Bridging the Gap” funds paved 27 miles of roads, restriped 1,578 miles of arterials, replaced street-name signs at 1,043 intersections, remarked 789 crosswalks, repaired 14 blocks of existing sidewalks, and built 13 blocks of new sidewalks. In addition, bridges were refurbished, guardrails replaced, staircases repaired and signs in school zones improved. Many more “Bridging the Gap” projects will be completed this year.

Bridging the Gap also recognized the importance of investing in priority major projects. In addition to the “Bridging the Gap” levy, the city knew it would need to rely on additional local, state, and federal funds to complete the Mercer and Spokane Street projects. Toward this end, in August 2006, the Council passed a commercial parking and employee head tax in order to raise funds for major capital projects. However, in November 2007, voters in the Puget Sound region rejected the “Roads and Transit” Proposition 1 ballot measure that would have dedicated $300 million to fund the remaining gap for our major projects. With this funding source unavailable we had to make some difficult choices in order to move forward with these regionally important projects. The Council determined that the Spokane Street Viaduct project was our highest priority, followed by the Mercer Corridor project. We affirm that decision.

In May 2008, the Council approved by a vote of 8-1 an initial funding package for the Spokane and Mercer projects, two regional projects that will improve mobility for vehicles, freight, transit, pedestrians, and bicyclists. This initial funding package included the selling of bonds backed by the commercial parking and employee tax. We authorized the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) to begin work on both projects this year. Next year, SDOT will present final project designs and recommendations on a funding plan. The Council will again review the projects in 2009 and determine a proper course of action. If state or federal funding is not available, we affirm our prioritization of the Spokane Street Viaduct project, including the option of moving funds from the Mercer Corridor project to the Spokane project.
The preliminary designs call for the 60-year old Spokane Street Viaduct to be replaced and widened with two travel lanes in each direction, one additional eastbound transit lane, and a new eastbound off-ramp to 4th Avenue South. The lower Spokane roadway will have wider sidewalks and enhanced freight mobility.

The preliminary designs for the Mercer Street Corridor address a 40-year problem of congestion and neighborhood separation by widening the roadway to three lanes in each direction, adding multiple traffic signals and wider sidewalks. Valley Street will be narrowed to one lane in each direction, plus a new bicycle path and wider sidewalks.

Both of these projects—Spokane Street and the Mercer corridor—are vital to our regional transportation system. They will help us maintain and attract jobs, continue to accommodate freight, and provide alternative transportation mobility. Both projects are on a timeline for completion before the Alaskan Way Viaduct is proposed to come down in 2012.

Neighborhood Projects

We recognize that we also have significant needs in our neighborhoods, and we have dedicated funding sources for these projects, including “Bridging the Gap,” Neighborhood Street Fund, and the Neighborhood Matching Fund.

Our sidewalk and pedestrian safety needs are also significant. We are in the process of developing a Pedestrian Master Plan that will be used as a tool to determine where gaps in infrastructure must be corrected. The plan will be completed in the spring of next year.

It is our desire to have a balanced transportation system. We affirm our support for regional mobility to move goods and people to and through Seattle while also improving our city infrastructure, especially in our neighborhoods.

It has been proposed that we immediately transfer Mercer Corridor project funds to support neighborhood infrastructure projects. We do not believe this action is justified and we will not consider such a transfer at this time.

These issues will continue to be closely followed by the Council’s Transportation Committee.

Sincerely,

Jan Drago
Chair, Transportation Committee

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