

Northwest Connectivity

Think globally, act locally

Tip O’Neill famously said that “All politics is local” – and Alaskan Way Viaduct politics don’t get any more local than the Elliott Avenue on-ramp to the viaduct and State Route 99 just north of the Pike Place Market.

Extending into the on-ramp is a concrete intrusion known as a curb bulb. This particular bulb was installed to make it safer for pedestrians to cross the on-ramp to get to the market and other places to the south, even though they could have used a signalized crosswalk less than one block away.

City transportation planners insist curb bulbs do not restrict traffic flows. On some streets that might be true, but it’s not for the curb bulb on Elliott.

In ones, twos, and threes, ambling pedestrians cross the on-ramp whenever they feel like it, usually bringing one, two, or three cars and trucks to a halt. Sometimes during the day, this causes nothing but some frustration. It’s just another chapter in the ongoing urban interplay between pedestrians and motorists. It happens thousands of times in local intersections all over town. Most of the people crossing Elliott don’t even bother to look up.

But the Elliott curb bulb is is’t just local to the pedestrian crossing. It obstructs an onramp to SR 99, one of the busiest truck routes in the state – and at peak travel times, if you take a more global look at the local interplay you see that the cumulative effect is a backup of cars, trucks, and buses that often extends north down Elliott for as far as the eye can see.

The same goes for a neighboring ramp at Western. The northbound traffic on the Western ramp frequently backs up onto the viaduct due to conflicts that occur between motorists, pedestrians, and transients on Western underneath the viaduct.

The good news is that all this may be improved by the deep bore tunnel plan, which would eliminate the curb bulb and open the way for other major improvements that would almost have to improve traffic flow.

But you have to wonder. Can you trust the city transportation planners who thought the Elliott curb bulb was a good idea to manage the new roadways? And, oops. We miswrote. The question isn’t really whether you can trust the city. The question is, Can some longtime community leaders in Ballard and Fremont trust the city?

There is quite a bit of history in northwest Seattle over urban amenities like curb bulbs and bike trails and lane reductions along truck routes, and it doesn’t help that the

notorious curb bulb on Elliott is located just one block from the boundary line of the 43rd District of the Washington State Legislature.

That district has been represented in the Washington State Legislature for the past 14 years by the Honorable Frank Chopp, D-Fremont. Representative Chopp has marshaled that seniority and strong personal political skills into an eight-year tenure as Speaker of the House of Representatives. That makes him a very influential person and the good folks in Fremont and Ballard have learned they can often rely on him to do a pretty good job representing them on state issues.

This is important for several reasons.

First, when the deep bore option was announced in January, it posed a number of challenges, including something that the transportation planning professions called “northwest connectivity.”

This refers to the fact that people from northwest Seattle who now use Elliott and Western to connect with SR 99 would no longer be able to do so in the new deep bore alignment. That’s because SR 99 would be moved some blocks east, where the tunnel would emerge somewhere along the Aurora section of SR 99 north of the Battery Street Tunnel.

This change would mean that Elliott and Western would no longer connect directly with SR 99, and that would be a pretty big deal even if there were no Speaker Chopp or long time community leaders because the Elliott and Western ramps presently carry about 33,000 north-south vehicles daily. That’s about one-third of all traffic on the viaduct, and these drivers would need to find new ways to travel north-south through the city and the traffic mix includes workers and freight essential to the North Pacific Fishing Fleet, which is based in Ballard and rakes in billions of dollars in regional wealth that comes to Seattle from Alaskan fishing grounds.

Yet as the planning process moved forward, it turned out the changes at Elliott and Western might not be bad. In fact, they might be good.

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After the viaduct is removed, SR 99 will move east, but Elliott and Western won’t go away. They will be connected instead with a new four-lane roadway that will extend down a ramp over the railroad tracks to touch ground near the ¹Pike Place Market Hillclimb in the footprint of the existing viaduct.

This road would become the main part of the new Alaskan Way surface street alignment. It would follow the present footprint of the viaduct to the Coleman Street ferry terminal, where it would become a six-lane road traveling south to reconnect with SR 99 somewhere near the sports stadiums.

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¹ HistoryLink.org, a reputable source, prefers “Hillclimb.”

The existing Alaskan Way surface road would continue to exist, connecting with the new road near the Hillclimb, then continuing in its present path north past the Port of Seattle headquarters on Pier 66 before tying into Broad.

As part of this new route, the present one-lane viaduct onramps at Elliott and Western would each be replaced by two new lanes that would blend into the four-lane ramp.

And, instead of having two crappy one-lane ramps carrying 33,000 vehicles daily, the four new lanes would need to handle only 25,000 vehicles because the other 8,000 vehicles would shift over to the deep bore tunnel. At least, that's the traffic reduction predicted at this point by the transportation planners.

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Sound good? Maybe. A four lane road can carry lots of vehicles. The floating bridge for SR 520 carries 110,000 vehicles every day. But, maybe not. It all depends on how the road is managed along the waterfront.

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Under the deep bore tunnel agreement, the Washington State Department of Transportation is responsible for building the new roads that replace the existing SR 99. But once the roads are built, it will be up to the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) to manage them. SDOT seldom meets a curb bulb it doesn't like, and a viaduct-free waterfront will be sooooo tempting when it comes to adding pedestrian and bicycle amenities.

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On top of all that, the waterfront roadway will be located inside the 43rd Legislative District.

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What to do?

It's a good time to make like our environmental friends and think globally while acting locally.

Globally, the deep bore plan vastly reduces disruption to the regional economy while the viaduct is being replaced and it could be built without need for an Armageddon like showdown between the city and the state over building permits and institutional conflicts that do not well serve the Washington state citizenry.

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But, to ²pass political muster, the deep bore plan must also work well locally for the North Pacific Fishing Fleet and tens of thousands of people who live and work in Ballard, Interbay, Magnolia and the rest of northwest Seattle.

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It's a good time for everyone to speak softly and get out a great big measuring stick and use it to make sure there's plenty of through capacity along Elliott and Western and all the way down the waterfront. Otherwise, the deep bore option might never get off the drawing board.

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² A "muster" was a kind of roll-call book often for the military; to be pass muster means to be authorized; your name had to be on that list.

