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## Some form of bored tunnel is still a good solution to the viaduct

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A remarkable event occurred Dec. 11 at the viaduct stakeholders meeting, when 24 of 25 members proposed continued consideration, as one of several options, a “surface-subsurface” option (dubbed P-3) — a grand compromise that would include components of the surface improvements, as well as a bored tunnel that would allow through capacity similar to what it is today.

In process-oriented Seattle, and with the lingering memory of controversy from the contentious vote from last year, the ability for a broad-based group of neighborhood, labor, business and environmental leaders to find common ground is a landmark event. The proposal would result in immediate enhancements to surface streets, transit, bicycle and pedestrian access and mobility, while advancing research for broader financing and engineering options for a bored tunnel. The bored tunnel offers us two things: first, the potential to retain the existing Alaskan Way Viaduct during most of the construction period, which is not possible with a rebuild; and, second (but perhaps most importantly) a political alliance that allows the viaduct issue to finally get settled.

We need to maintain our transportation capacity. The bored tunnel, although it would likely cost more than a rebuild, is a good investment. It is important to keep in mind that a specific funding package for the bored tunnel construction phase of this regional corridor, much like the buildout of State Route 520 and Interstate 405, need not be all accounted for in 2009; in fact, it will be several years before the design work is even ready. Thus the 2009 Legislature, facing a large deficit, need not address the funding of this future phase. Economic studies have shown potential losses to our regional economy of up \$3.4 billion a year during any closure of the viaduct and the potential loss of tens of thousands of jobs.

Last year, those facts and others led Gov. Chris Gregoire, King County Executive Ron Sims and Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels to create the stakeholders’ group to examine the issue and recommend final options. The recent decision to narrow the choice to two options omits a tunnel. We hope the elected leaders will listen to the consensus the stakeholders’ group reached at its final meeting: keep a surface-subsurface hybrid solution among other options.

The grand compromise we envision would do many things: maximize new open space on the waterfront, preserve valuable throughput, reduce construction and operating impacts on

businesses and residents, reduce bypass and freight traffic from city streets, create jobs and provide an affordable solution with a long-term return on investment. In short, the grand compromise solution may accomplish what no single solution alone can. Keeping through traffic separated from the surface allows streets to serve local access, transit, bicycle and pedestrian uses more effectively, preserving the quality of our urban environment.

As far as tunnels go, it's worth noting that since the last time Seattle seriously considered one for the Alaskan Way Viaduct, technology has advanced remarkably in terms of capability, diameter width and safety. It is now possible and even common for urban areas to build large highway tunnels in the worst of ground conditions. Recently, cities as disparate as Miami, Los Angeles, Paris, Madrid, Shanghai and Moscow have either proposed or built tunnels.

Seattle itself uses tunnels, including the recently completed Sound Transit Beacon Hill tunnel, which came in very close to its original budget of \$300 million and without any significant technical issues. The experience of designing and managing construction of the downtown transit tunnel (completed in 1986) tells us that ground risk for a bored tunnel can be minimized since most of the downtown is already surveyed and conditions are widely understood. A major tunnel is also planned for extension of light rail to the University District as a result of the November election.

And a recently completed tunnel cost-comparison estimate shows clearly that tunnels are being built around the world, at a faster pace, at less cost and disruption, using highly advanced technology.

We understand that the Viaduct Project Team, a group of agency officials, also has experts who have completed more than 1,000 miles of tunnel; their "hard costs" for tunnel construction are not far from the estimate generated by an independent team's research. Adding "soft costs" on top of the hard cost estimate — such as peripheral improvements, seawall replacement, inflation and risks — is a policy debate, but it is very possible to mitigate the risks and wait on some of these add-ons until the core project is funded and built at a fraction of the original estimated cost. It's important to consider the long-term life cycle of a 100-year tunnel versus other options. As a top state economist notes, a tunnel will pay for itself in 10 to 20 years.

Another reason to maintain the "surface-subsurface" compromise is to provide a catalyst for early adoption of some innovative transportation management and funding tools, such as congestion pricing, and "local improvement district" financing that asks those that benefit the most from higher property values to support funding the construction of the tunnel. Finally, the city and the Port of Seattle should be partners in any regional funding package for a tunnel.

As is typically the case in Seattle, a compromise solution — decided by citizens, not elected or appointed officials — could offer the best of all solutions. The benefits of this grand compromise are too compelling to ignore. Let's hope the governor, county executive and mayor see it the same way.

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