

OCL *Rethinking I-81* Study  
Presentation By Tom Brennan, Principal Nelson/Nygaard  
Steering Committee Meeting Minutes  
University College  
Feb. 20, 2008

Present: Russ Andrews, Joseph Ash, Phil Bousquet, Carol Dwyer, Bill Egloff, John Felleman, Linda Henley, David Holder, Karen Kitney, Rich Landerkin, Rebecca Livengood, Kevin McAuliffe, Sarah McIlvain, Van Robinson, Donna O'Mahoney Rohde, Benjamin Sio, Doug Sutherland, Elaine Walter, Sandra Barrett, Rachel Pollack

Sandra Barrett introduced Tom Brennan, a CNY native, now Portland-based transportation planner currently at work on the replacement of Seattle's earthquake damaged elevated urban highway, Highway 99.

Video of PowerPoint presentation by Tom Brennan is available from OCL.

Highlights:

- An earthquake in 2001 that damaged Hwy 99 was the impetus to the project. The highway was built on fill, underground piles have become a problem and the seawall that holds up the highway is disintegrating.
- Why is the 1.4 mile section of Highway 99 being reworked? The parallel section of the waterfront has transitioned dramatically over the last 20 years from an industrial area to a key tourist attraction with shops, museums, and beautiful views. Highway 99 cuts off downtown from this waterfront area.
- Brennan mentioned Seattle's booming economy: 30,000 new jobs in city center over next 20 years and about 60,000 new residents in the same area; over 1.0 million expected in Puget Sound region in the same period.
- Brennan explained that Hwy 99 carries about 110,000 vehicles over the course of a day, a number that in reality is inflated, but he explained it is a number that "has gotten into people's heads. Usage on Hwy 99 is primarily a "peak hour problem"; a four-lane boulevard could handle traffic flow at other times of day. "It's a lesson to any community that is going to take on this kind of project, that you really need to be careful about what the numbers mean and what gets put into the press." (Brennan also explained the traffic patterns of the parallel I-5, 290,000 trips a day, runs from Canada to San Diego)
- Brennan explained transportation issues of downtown Seattle. Within downtown's narrow hourglass shape there are about six north/south arterials, he said, and this limited capacity will provide a challenge when taking down a major north/south highway. Also, he explained, colliding grids complicate traffic flow.
- While Downtown has grown significantly, there has been almost no growth in highway volumes in the last decade on both Hwy 99 and I-5 as well as on downtown streets. Compensating is investment in transit and an increased use of transit; ridership is up 50,000 daily trips within the last year.
- Initial DOT study included only a narrow corridor around Hwy; ignored larger ramifications (development; tourism etc.)
- Huge amount of public interest; many alternatives considered from deep bore tunnels to floating technology. Focused on 5 alternatives; 1) elevated replacement built to modern standards creating larger structure 2) six-lane two tube tunnel 3) bypass tunnel with surface blvd 4) surface alternative replacement with six-lane boulevard (ignored larger area) 5) stacked tunnel.

- Cost became divisive issue between city and state government; conflict led to public referendum but one of referendum alternatives was vetoed by the Washington State DOT at the last minute; following referendum, city, county and local DOT have attempted conciliation and are again looking at various alternatives.
- Surface and Transit alternative considered; becoming popular and gaining advocates including a citizens group pushing waterfront development agenda; Brennan's firm responsible for delivering surface and transit alternative to city.
- New Goal Set:
  - Efficient movement of people and goods (not just vehicles);
  - enhance waterfront and downtown public space;
  - boosting economy by maintaining access; fiscal responsibility;
  - safety and public health;
  - social justice (no major residential neighborhoods impacted, so not a major consideration).
- City prefers boulevard (considering various boulevard alternatives, six lane, multi-lane, limited access boulevard similar to Chicago's Lake Shore Drive), with or without tunnel, reintroduction of streetcar, pedestrian friendly.
- Focus on fixing grid: Much power in street grid created properly to funnel Hwy 99 traffic into downtown; making I-5 work better, possible ramp removal, traffic caused by people lining up to get on highway.
- New and increased transit options including possibly light rail, urban street cars, bike networks ; possible increased dedication of streets to bus traffic during peak hours; changes in freight delivery; changes in parking management; complete streets ordinance to improve access for pedestrians.
- Concept: Systems Management:
  - active traffic management,
  - parking management, electronic parking guidance systems (common in European cities, signage showing where in city parking available, direction to areas and even to specific garages),
  - traffic signal synchronization; traffic signal priority for traffic and freight.]

Land Use Policy, creating denser more walkable neighborhoods.

- Seattle has looked to Vancouver for solutions: High-density mixed-used neighborhoods. Even with large growth Vancouver (22 percent) seven percent decrease in vehicle use, increase in walking trips, decline in amount of time commuting. High density makes transit work.
- Highway removal projects, nationally and internationally, including San Francisco where city planners have made conscious decision that freeways should get people into downtown but not move them through downtown, (discussion of impact on sprawl.)
- Highway removal case study findings:
  - Reduction of roadway capacity reduces the number of vehicle trips;
  - spillover traffic can be absorbed;
  - a major shift to transit not required;
  - removal has led to urban development;
  - should be a part of a larger plan;
  - good design and illustration is key.

Points raised during discussion:

- Divisiveness of political process in early stages of Seattle process; voter distrust; many different groups active in pushing different alternatives.
- Nature of Seattle survey: not general public but instead Seattle's movers and shakers.
- Cost of surface and transit alternative as opposed to tunnel and other options (difficult to determine; how to cost); likely not less expensive than moderate replacement alternatives.
- Importance of good design, showing different alternatives. Early community involvement and high design impact crucial to success of projects.
- Sometimes a surface road delivering people into downtown can serve better than a freeway (consider traffic caused by entry/exit to on/off ramps, backtracking to and from ramps away from travel destination.)
- Special considerations to emergency vehicles; in Seattle possible transit-only lane could provide for emergency vehicles.
- Milwaukee may be the most comparable case study to Syracuse.
- Mid-century highways are not built to safety requirements of today; make sure an altered "replacement elevated highway" is part of design presentation process.

"We always say, transportation's not an end in and of itself. It should serve some larger community goals. (Creating) a good design process can help people understand that the freeway is not just there to move people. It's there to deliver people to downtown. It's there to support emergency access to your great medical institutions. There's broader community goals that ought to be served by that facility (highway)...allowing people to go through the process and look at (that) in terms of those broader goals instead of just in terms of their perception of their personal trip."

--Tom Brennan

" I would imagine that 481 would provide a pretty viable bypass...you don't have a really solid grid downtown but it seems to me there's a lot of capacity on parallel streets, there are opportunities to improve the grid...A surface boulevard can still carry a lot of capacity. I think it's very doable from an urban development perspective."

--Tom Brennan

"Ironically several years ago we had a closure of 81 and the community was up in arms because it was thought that all of that traffic would pour into the local streets....we also had the transportation system on track which were going to run special trains from the suburbs to downtown....guess what, the trains ran empty.... everyone found a way to get in and out and get to work."

--Van Robinson