



**COMMISSION
AGENDA MEMORANDUM**

Item No. 7b

BRIEFING ITEM

Date of Meeting May 12, 2020

DATE: May 5, 2020
TO: Stephen P. Metruck, Executive Director
FROM: Pearse Edwards, Senior Director, External Relations
Lindsay Wolpa, Senior Manager, Waterfront Redevelopment Programs, External Relations
SUBJECT: Update on the West Seattle Bridge Closure

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This briefing outlines the current status of the ongoing interagency response in which the Port of Seattle and the Northwest Seaport Alliance staff participate related to the closure of the West Seattle Bridge (WSB). A representative from Seattle’s Department of Transportation (SDOT) will be providing an overview and background on how the City came to the decision to close the bridge as well as the next steps with their response. In addition, Port staff will be outlining our internal next steps, in coordination with the Northwest Seaport Alliance, to respond to the issue on multiple fronts.

BACKGROUND

The WSB was the busiest city-owned roadway and carried 100,000 cars and trucks and nearly 25,000 transit riders on a typical weekday until its closure by the City of Seattle on March 23, 2020. Out of an abundance of caution, the City decided to close the WSB to all traffic due to accelerated concrete cracking that was identified during a regular bridge inspection. Upon further inspection the City later announced that the WSB will remain closed until further notice.

Along with the Spokane Street Bridge, also called the “low bridge,” the bridge played an important role in commuter and freight mobility. According to the Port’s 2014 Container Access Study, that corridor carried approximately 12,000 vehicles per day, of which approximately more than 2,000 were port trucks (with a two-berth international container operation at Terminal 5). With the WSB closure all vehicles are prohibited from crossing the high-rise span of the bridge between I-5 and Fauntleroy Way SW. Buses, freight and emergency vehicles were moved to Spokane Street Bridge. All other vehicular traffic must find alternate routes to their destinations.

Even with the limited permitted vehicular uses, the low bridge experiences congestion especially when ships are being on-/off-loaded and the swing bridge opens to allow for maritime traffic

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passage. Vehicular traffic will be exacerbated once commuters return to the roadways this summer as the COVID-19 pandemic eases.

The WSB was originally designed for three lanes of travel in each direction. As Seattle grew, the bridge grew to three westbound lanes and four eastbound. This added traffic, combined with the significant increase in size and weight of commercial vehicles and transit, compounded the long-term maintenance challenges posed to the bridge structure WSB. Further, 80 percent of the bridge load is dead load, meaning deterioration is possible even when all traffic is removed.

In 2019, however, the Federal load rating for this type of bridge changed and the City assembled a team of engineers and experts from the public and private sectors to begin actively assessing the extent and growth of bridge cracking, create safety recommendations, and a short-term repair plan. As a component of that review, the City has been regularly inspecting concrete cracks in the high bridge. During a late March inspection, one of their engineers found known cracks in the concrete had worsened at a rate that the City and outside specialists found unacceptable, hence the decision to close the WSB to all traffic.

In the immediate aftermath of the bridge's closure, Port and NWSA staff engaged with the City and other stakeholders to ensure access to Terminal 5 (T-5) to support cargo operations and continues to acknowledge the importance of continual freight access through the SW Spokane Street corridor.

With respect to the NWSA-managed container terminals and freight access – the City acknowledges the importance of the NWSA's container terminals to the regional economy through the "Container Port Element" of their Comprehensive Plan. More specifically, it calls for them to: "Monitor, maintain and improve key freight corridors, networks and intermodal connections that provide access to cargo container facilities and the industrial areas around them to address bottlenecks and other access constraints. Provide safe, reliable, efficient and direct access between Port marine facilities and the state highway or interstate system, and between Port terminals and railroad intermodal facilities ..."

The policy is implemented through Seattle's Freight Master Plan, which lists the SW Spokane Street, including the low bridge, as "Major Truck Street." It is also part of the City's designated freight network, providing access to the freeway system and rail intermodal facilities in Seattle. In addition, it is a key corridor on the City's heavy haul network, enabling trucks with up to 98,000 gross weight to move between T-5 and the railyards and transload facilities in the surrounding Manufacturing Industrial Center.

CURRENT STATUS

The City will be providing an overview of what led to closure of the WSB and how they have responded to date, including ongoing emergency contingency efforts, the near-term timeline on shoring and other engineering work and initial traffic mitigation plans.

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The City does not yet know if repair of the bridge is feasible technically or financially. If repair is feasible, it's likely this would only restore up to an additional decade of life to the bridge. In either case, the high bridge will need to be replaced much sooner than its anticipated 75-year design life when it opened in 1984. Further, should repair prove feasible, under a "best case" scenario, the City does not anticipate traffic returning to the bridge in 2020 or 2021.

Additional activities underway by the City include, but are not limited to:

- Working to stabilize the bridge and prevent further cracking by fixing bearings on Pier 18 and constructing shoring support structures;
- Exploring long-term solutions to see if it's feasible to repair the bridge;
- Enlisting help from experts across the country and forming a Technical Advisory Panel;
- Working with local transit agencies to keep people moving to and from West Seattle; and
- Installing intelligent sensor equipment to monitor any changes to the bridge and send real-time alerts 24/7.

External Engagement

The interagency structure used under the Alaskan Way Viaduct Replacement Program is being reconfigured to support the WSB response/replacement. The Port and NWSA already has a seat at each of those conversations. They now include:

- Executive Oversight – other agencies include representatives from Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), SDOT, Seattle's Office of the Waterfront, King County Metro, the U.S. Coast Guard and Sound Transit.
- Interagency Leadership – staff from the different agencies discuss key issues and set strategy for executive meeting.
- Communications Group – Public Information Officers address media and public facing issues.
- Traffic and Operations – Traffic planners and engineers address long-term and near-term flow issues.
- Performance Monitoring – Planners, analysts and engineers review travel times and volumes and develop reports for public digest.

In addition, two new efforts have already begun with consistent involvement from Port and NWSA staff:

- Twice weekly interagency check-in – agency staff coordinate planned actions and review recent traffic flows and outcomes.
- Emergency Contingency Planning – SDOT facilitating, includes Seattle Police Department (SPD), Seattle Fire Department (SFD), Office of Emergency Management, utilities, The US Coast Guard (USCG), BNSF, Washington State Ferries and many other agencies

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Finally, staff is engaged in maritime and industrial stakeholder facilitation as well as with the West Seattle community and SODO, South Park and Georgetown neighborhoods. Staff held two separate meetings with these stakeholders from around Harbor Island and along the Duwamish, as well as key labor and association partners. This coalition work will continue and has already proved to be a reliable outlet for the City in understanding impacts to our sectors. The City has already committed to hosting this group on a monthly basis and will be convening its first meeting on the morning of May 9. The Port and NWSA expects to convene another regular meeting as well to focus on waterside issues and will participate in a community effort led by the West Seattle Chamber.

Port and NWSA Internal Working Groups

The Port and NWSA continue to play a role in the City's response to the high bridge closure. This involvement is expected to deepen in the coming weeks and months as the City identifies next steps on repairs to and/or replacement options for the WSB. Given the implication to both Port and NWSA managed properties, as well as the broad maritime economy and supply chain, this effort will be closely coordinated between the Port and NWSA at all levels.

Because of the multiple tentacles related to this project, Port and NWSA staff has begun to organize into several different internal working groups to meet regularly to address a host of issues relating to the bridge's closure. Each of those groups is tasked to define strategies and workplans within the next couple of weeks, at which point we would seek broader executive and commissioner input, including a communications and outreach plan.

These groups include:

- *Executive Committee*: ensure senior management is well informed and can provide regular input as the response and replacement process unfolds
- *Emergency Contingency Planning*: will focus on establishing a safety management plan in the unlikely event of a catastrophic failure of the high bridge.
- *Operational Strategy and Performance Monitoring*: will focus on keeping our cargo terminal operational and freight moving thru the gateway and throughout the Duwamish MIC. This includes collecting and developing the data and analysis that will be needed to work productively with the City to ensure adequate landside access and egress for Port and NWSA facilities beyond emergency/contingency planning.
- *Water Transportation*: will draft a proposal as to how Port/NWSA can support the broadened movement of people and goods via water routes such as fast ferries. This will include, but not be limited to, establishing which shoreline properties could be used to support access, determining what uses could be provided at each property and establishing what external partners to engage on this effort.
- *Transit*: coordinate strategy with external partners on expanded transit needs in light of the closure and provide guidance around Port/NWSA employee mobility and commuting needs. The working group will also external working group with other partners around Harbor Island and the Duwamish to expand transit options.

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- *Replacement Strategy*: draft Port/NWSA strategy for the eventual bridge replacement. This will include, but not be limited to, working with our congressional delegation on federal funding, coordinating with WSDOT, SDOT, the County and Sound Transit establishing guidance on replacement options and financing, especially as to how the replacement intertwines with ST3.
- *Outreach and Communications*: set the recommended strategy for external outreach and communications activities.

Staff will be preparing workplans for each of these groups in the coming weeks and sharing them with the commissioner as they are interested.

ATTACHMENTS TO THIS BRIEFING

- (1) Presentation slides

PREVIOUS COMMISSION ACTIONS OR BRIEFINGS

None