Transportation

With the permanent closure of the Alaskan Way Viaduct, we have entered what City calls our “Period of Maximum Constraint”, a confluence of transportation disruptions in and around the Greater Downtown area. In spring, Metro and Sound Transit busses will be diverted from the Downtown Seattle Transit Tunnel to surface streets. In summer, tolling will begin on SR-99 through the tunnel. Over the next five years, a set of major and overlapping capital projects including the Viaduct demolition, Waterfront construction, Key Arena renovation, and Convention Center expansion will significantly impact the right of way.

Whether we walk, bike, bus, or drive, all of us are going to find it more difficult to travel through the city, particularly in and around Downtown. Now is a good time to reflect on the state of our transportation network and imagine how we could do things better, both in District 7 and Seattle as a whole. We should take this opportunity to make a virtue of necessity and set our priorities straight.

As the District 7 Seattle City Council representative I will work to expand and improve mass transit service, to invest in pedestrian and bike infrastructure, to make good on our commitment to Vision Zero, and to better realize a transportation network that is robustly multi-modal, safe, reliable, connected, integrated, and equitable.

Priorities

Seattle has added over 120,000 new residents since 2010 and Downtown has added over 60,000 new jobs, yet the number of daily commutes to Greater Downtown Seattle by people driving alone has decreased by 4,500. The net growth in total number of commutes to our urban core has been completely absorbed by other transportation modes, almost entirely by increases in mass transit ridership.

According to the latest data, people driving alone comprise only 25% of peak period commutes to Greater Downtown Seattle. We can expect this number to drop slightly when Sound Transit completes the Northgate, Lynwood and the East Link Extensions over the next five years. But today, nearly 60% of these commutes originate from within Seattle. Overall, 51% of Seattle commuters drive alone.

The City is right to discourage people from driving Downtown. Car traffic is environmentally pernicious, dangerous for pedestrians and cyclists, and competes with mass transit in the right of way. But the City is wrong to punish those for whom driving Downtown is an unfortunate necessity. Residents who struggle with the first and last mile, or have young children, or who work more than one job or jobs at odd hours, or who bring their tools with them to work, often rely on their car in ways others do not. This fact will not change in the absence of significant expansion of fast, frequent, and reliable mass transit alternatives.

Currently, 33% of Seattle residents do not have access to frequent transit service. The 2018 map of Seattle areas with infrequent transit service strongly correlates with the map of Seattle areas where residents are most likely to own cars. Transit ridership in Seattle is growing faster than anywhere else in the nation, yet Metro Transit reports persistent issues of overcrowding, unreliability, and inadequate service levels on major Seattle transit corridors. Seattle aspires to be an interconnected city, yet many of our neighborhoods are isolated by infrequent transit service. Seattle aspires to be an equitable city, yet the dividends of our transit investments are inequitably distributed. Seattle residents will continue to drive if we fail to give them a plausible alternative. We owe it to
underserved residents that these inequities be remedied, and to all residents that we invest in an environmentally
sane transportation network that works for all.

The dedication of City leaders to pursuing local policies that benefit the most vulnerable among us is commendable. Our transportation policies, however, too often miss this mark. The City claims commitment to Vision Zero – our plan to eliminate traffic deaths and serious injuries by 2030 – while systematically underfunding basic pedestrian infrastructure and even rolling back funding earmarked to protect kids walking to school. The City touts its bicycle capitol bona fides despite failing to make even nominal progress on building out the basic bike network. Crucial transit upgrades, like the seven new RapidRide routes promised in the Move Seattle Levy, have been scaled back or eliminated, even though they would have served those neighborhoods suffering most from inadequate transit service. One of the largest barriers to economic mobility among the poor is the length and difficulty of their commute, yet commuting times to and from Seattle continue to increase.

Proposals

People will choose to walk, bike, and bus when these modes are safer, faster, more reliable, better connected, and more fully integrated with each other. The City should be doing everything it can to make these choices more attractive by increasing and upgrading transit service, building out our pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and making good on the promises of the Move Seattle Levy and our transportation master plans.

Consider District 7’s own notorious Mercer Mess. This is a great example of the City having found a way to make every mode of transportation on and around a major corridor simultaneously dangerous, slow, and unreliable. Mercer can be fixed, however, and the solutions apply more generally to Seattle as a whole.

The best way to reduce traffic congestion on Mercer is to provide better transit service to and through South Lake Union. We should prioritize investments in routes like the 40, which operates at or above capacity during peak hours, and upgrade them to RapidRide lines. We also need dedicated transit service connecting Interbay, Uptown, South Lake Union, and Capitol Hill. Our densest and fastest growing neighborhoods need to connect to our technology and life-science industries and the jobs they create.

We should explore the use of civilian traffic enforcement officers to direct traffic at routinely congested intersections during peak commuting times and before and after large events. They would help keep traffic flowing smoothly, prevent drivers from blocking intersections, prioritize transit mobility, and protect pedestrians and cyclists. Many major cities use traffic enforcement officers to good effect, and we already have parking enforcement officers trained to do the job.

We should restrict arterial traffic trying to turn onto Mercer, particularly during the busiest times of the day. Left turn and right-on-red restrictions should be in place more widely, and arterial traffic should be diverted to dedicated feeder streets better equipped to handle it.

We should complete the 9th Ave N Safety Project, which is almost three years overdue. Phases I and II are complete, but the final Phase III has been perpetually delayed. Only two unfinished blocks on 9th N separate the protected bike lane along Westlake from the Downtown bike network. The City Council has demanded that it be completed by December 31st, 2019. This timeline should be accelerated.
We should recalibrate our adaptive signals to improve safety and mobility for transit, pedestrians, and cyclists. Adaptive signals along Mercer and elsewhere prioritize vehicles over people by virtue of counting vehicles rather than people. Single-occupancy vehicles are given equal priority to Metro Transit buses operating at capacity. Pedestrians and cyclists are uncounted. This is dumb policy infecting smart technology.

Mercer is a good example of bad planning yielding predictable results. But there are other examples where the City could be doing a better job ensuring that transportation planning, policy, and management benefit everyone. Here are a few salient examples, particularly for residents in District 7:

**Construction and Pedestrian Mobility:** For three years running Seattle has led the nation in the number of construction cranes punctuating our skyline, and most of those cranes are located in District 7. Seattle is booming, and the encroachments of large-scale construction projects on the public right-of-way cause frequent and avoidable challenges for people moving through our densest and busiest neighborhoods. These challenges affect all modes of transportation but are particularly difficult for pedestrians.

In early 2016, SDOT published a new Director’s Rule regarding construction impacts to pedestrian mobility. The rule specifies that it is City policy to protect pedestrian mobility along existing sidewalks unless it is impractical, in which case pedestrians may be rerouted off the sidewalk. If a reroute is impractical, pedestrians may be detoured across the street. No detours are supposed to be allowed when the sidewalk across the street is also blocked to pedestrians.

The City’s standard for allowing sidewalks to be closed to pedestrians should be stronger. Developers should have to show that there is a compelling need to close a sidewalk and reroute or detour pedestrians, not merely that it would be impractical for them not to do so. Site plans should make preservation of the public right-of-way a top priority, and SDOT should ensure that developers and contractors are doing everything they can to keep sidewalks and other lanes of travel free from obstruction. As we enter a period of intense and overlapping construction projects throughout the Downtown core, it is essential to ensure that people can walk safely and efficiently through the area.

**Thomas Street Greenway:** At the end of the last budget season, the City Council directed SDOT to identify any funding gaps for the proposed Thomas Street Greenway. Once Thomas Street is reconnected to the street grid, this greenway, if seen through to completion, will be the only major pedestrian thoroughfare directly connecting South Lake Union to Uptown and a renovated Key Arena. Investments in pedestrian infrastructure projects like this make Seattle a safer, better connected, and more livable city.

On projects like this, the details really matter. Recent plans for Thomas Street Greenway include a traffic diverter at its intersection with Aurora. This is a good start, but does not go far enough to reduce traffic volume on a street we want to function as a major pedestrian corridor. We should explore preventing through-traffic on Thomas by closing some blocks to cars and converting them to pedestrian-only zones, or requiring cars to turn off of Thomas at their first opportunity, or at least adding traffic diverters to other intersections along the proposed greenway.

**TNC Boarding Zones:** Ridership data from Transportation Network Companies (TNCs) like Uber and Lyft reveal that they provide over 90,000 trips per day in the Seattle area and those trips are concentrated in our densest, busiest neighborhoods. Over 40,000 of those trips originate, collectively, in Downtown, Belltown, South Lake Union, and Capitol Hill. TNCs are undoubtedly exacerbating congestion in these areas, making it more difficult and dangerous for people to get around by other means. TNC drivers roam along our busiest streets, make abrupt and unpredictable stops, and, when no parking is available at a pickup spot, double-park in the right-of-way while awaiting their passenger. This has to change.
TNCs provide a valuable service, but one in need of better management. In consultations with TNCs, major employers, and transportation advocacy organizations, the City should establish dedicated TNC boarding zones at select locations, near transit hubs, in the neighborhoods where their services are most utilized.

**The Magnolia Bridge Replacement Project:** Ever since the Magnolia Bridge was damaged, first by a landslide in 1997 and then by the Nisqually earthquake in 2001, the City has promised to replace it. It has become clear, however, that the City will not be able to keep that promise. It simply does not have approximately $400 million necessary to build a 1:1 replacement. This is an instance of a more general trend. Seattle has an increasing backlog of infrastructure maintenance. Signals, sidewalks, streets, and bridges across the city are old, deteriorating, and badly in need to repair or replacement. The fact is we cannot maintain our infrastructure without substantial aid from our regional partners and the state and federal government.

Fortunately, Councilmember Bagshaw has been working closely with our 36th district state legislators (Sen. Carlyle and Reps. Tarleton and Frame), Sound Transit, the Port of Seattle, and other stakeholders to ensure that the Magnolia Bridge be included in capital planning for other projects along Interbay, like the ST3 light-rail expansion across Salmon Bay and into Ballard. Their goal, which I share and support, is to attempt to secure funding to replace the Magnolia Bridge by tying the project to larger plans for the development of the Interbay corridor.