

COMMUNITY MEETING SUMMARY

Montlake Project Signage

Queen City Yacht Club, 2608 Boyer Ave. E
Wednesday, Jan. 31, 2024 – 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.
Hybrid meeting format

- Facilitator:** Angie Thomson, Thomson Strategic
- Speakers:** Dave Becher, SR 520 Director of Construction
David Goldberg, SR 520 Community Liaison and Ombudsman
Rachel Ben-Shmuel, Montlake signage workgroup member
- Participant attendance:** Approximately 30 attendees online; 40 attendees in person

Meeting materials:

- Link to meeting presentation: <https://wsdot.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-02/SR%20520-Meetingsummary-Jan31MontlakeSignBridgeCommunity%20Meeting.pdf>
- Link to meeting recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6R4sYz6o8us>
- Link to October community survey results: https://reporting.alchemer.com/r/374437_6544008c018552.49812796

Meeting goals

The goal of the meeting was to provide an overview of the workgroup process, share the workgroup's signage recommendations and solicit feedback from the community.

Welcome – Group guidelines and community process (Angie Thomson and David Goldberg)

Angie began the meeting at approximately 5:43 p.m. by introducing the purpose of the meeting and her role as facilitator. She introduced speakers Rachel Ben-Shmuel, Dave Becher and David Goldberg who all served on the Montlake signage workgroup.

Angie instructed the Zoom participants and in-person attendees on how to participate in the discussion and established group guidelines. She then reviewed the meeting agenda.

Part 1 – History and engagement process (Angie Thomson)

Angie gave a summary of the community engagement process related to the sign bridges. This included a community survey in October 2023 after WSDOT received feedback from the community about the two newly installed sign bridges. WSDOT held a community meeting on Oct. 26, 2023, and then formed a workgroup that met four times between Nov. 2023 and Jan. 2024. Tonight was the second community meeting focused on this topic.

Part 2 – Overview of the workgroup process (Angie Thomson)

Angie discussed the process of the workgroup and who was represented. She gave an overview of workgroup meetings and purpose of each. She shared the respective goals and priorities of both WSDOT and the community.

Rachel then spoke on behalf of the workgroup. She shared that she has lived in Montlake for 39 years. She felt appalled by the sign bridges when they first went up. She joined the workgroup because she

believed the sign bridges needed to be changed. She was skeptical at first because she has attended meetings before when she feels like WSDOT “hears” the neighbors but nothing changes.

During the workgroup, WSDOT staff showed real support for responding to neighbors’ concerns. They proposed much more palatable solutions. The workgroup didn’t come out of the process getting everything they wanted (like removing the sign bridge on the new Montlake lid) – but they got a lot of what they wanted. There was a real commitment from the group to change the signs.

Senator Pedersen attended the meeting via Zoom. He extended a thank you to the workgroup members who agreed to participate in the process. He thanked staff at WSDOT, particularly David Goldberg and Omar Jepperson, who were willing to listen to concerns, change course and have a real community process. Sen. Pedersen said he was excited to see the recommendations and glad to see we’re headed toward a different result. Once the process is complete, he’ll work with Rep. Macri and Rep. Chopp to get the funding for the recommendations.

Angie showed an example of how workgroup members made decisions. The technical team reviewed all the recommendations made by the community as part of the community survey and first community meeting. The technical team then crossed out options that were not consistent with WSDOT’s or the community’s goals. They put green circles next to the options they analyzed. They put blue stars next to the options and ideas that they recommended and believed best represented the shared goals.

Part 3 – Workgroup recommendations

Sign Location #1

Angie introduced Sign Location #1, located between E Roanoke Street and Lake Washington Boulevard. She showed a picture of the existing sign bridge and a visualization of what it would look like in five years. The visualization showed the original dimensions of the signs planned at this location.

Rachel shared the workgroup recommendations for Sign Location #1. These included:

- Replace the existing sign bridge with a new, black-painted mast arm.
- Install smaller signs supported by the new mast arm.
- The mast arm should be installed as far north as technically feasible (approx. 10 ft from the current sign bridge location).
- Understanding/agreement that the existing sign bridge be removed as soon as possible.
- To allow for reduced sign sizes at Sign Location #1, add advance signs at 24th Avenue E.
- Advance signs supported by a new, black-painted mast arm (vs. side-mounted signs).

Angie shared that the sign structure will be moved as far north as technically feasible (about 10 feet). She also shared that WSDOT needs to put temporary signs on the sign bridge until the new mast arm is installed.

Alternatives considered but not selected

Dave Becher reviewed some of the other sign structure options the technical team considered. He thanked everyone for coming to the meeting and he thanked the workgroup members. He said that it was one of the best workgroup experiences he’s ever had.

Dave clarified that the signs that are scheduled to be installed on the two existing sign bridges will be the smaller signs and not the larger, original signs.

Dave shared that the technical team evaluated cantilever arms, span wires, painted highway shields, and combining both the signs and signals onto a single mast arm. Cantilever arms were ultimately not ideal because they’re bigger in scale than mast arms. They are large, heavy structures. The technical team felt that cantilever arms didn’t meet the goals and priorities of the workgroup, primarily because they’re not visually compatible with the historic neighborhood.

The technical team also looked at supporting the signs using span wires. There are inherent maintenance issues with span wires, and they do not work well in inclement weather conditions, especially high winds.

In addition, the size and number of signs needed at all three locations would be too big and too heavy to be supported by a span wire.

The team also looked at painted highway shields on the roadway. Painted shields are used for supplemental signing only. In addition, painted shields are easily blocked by cars, and they require a lot of maintenance.

Last, the team considered putting both the signs and signals on the same mast arm. Ultimately the team eliminated this option for several reasons. First, the amount of space is limited on the mast arm and it's critical, per MUTCD requirements, to have the signs go over their respective lanes. Second, the existing signal mast arms are not in the correct location for where the signs need to be. Last, having both the signs and signals on a single arm would be too heavy for a single pole.

Questions

- **Question:** Can you give us a timeframe for when the sign bridge structure will be taken down?
Answer: This is complicated. Fabricating a new structure can take anywhere from 10-12 months. This will have to be done with a separate contract and specialty contractor. We should have the contract finalized this year and have the existing sign bridge replaced in 2025.
- **Comment:** I want to thank WSDOT and the workgroup. I'm sure WSDOT doesn't get this very often, but I wanted to give you a round of applause.
- **Question:** Can you provide more detail about the funding piece and what are the risks related to funding?
Answer: We're looking at around \$750,000 to make the recommended changes. This includes the cost for potentially repainting Sign Bridge #2 another color. We think that amount is doable – but ultimately that's up to the Legislature. The end of the session is on March 7. David Goldberg has briefed Senator Pedersen about the cost estimate.
- **Comment:** I feel that the advanced signage on 24th Avenue E should be further south.
Answer: The location of those advance signs was to replicate the same distance for advance warning that they'll receive with the signs at location #1. Also, it's very difficult to find a location within the public right of way that has enough space to install these advance signs.
- **Question:** On the information that we were provided, it shows a right turn arrow at Sign Location #1. Is that having people turn onto E North Street or onto Lake Washington Boulevard?
Answer: That right turn arrow is directing HOV 3+ drivers to turn right onto Lake Washington Boulevard.
- **Question:** Is there something different about Montlake Boulevard than other residential city streets? Are you breaking the standards by reducing the size of the signs? Were you assuming the speed limit was 50 miles an hour when you designed the larger signs initially?
Answer: The smaller dimensions we achieved as part of this process are the minimum allowed per MUTCD standards for this type of road classification. So, we are not breaking any standards here. As to why the signs were originally so much larger, when traffic engineers design signage, they don't typically design the signs to be as small as possible. You want to give yourself some wiggle room with the size (i.e., make them larger) to account for things like drivers with reduced vision, inclement weather, distracted drivers, etc. The minimum size may not always be the best option for everyone.

Sign Location #2

Angie transitioned back to the presentation and showed a visualization of Sign Location #2. The workgroup made the recommendation to reduce the size of the signs. The workgroup did not recommend keeping the sign bridge but understood the technical limitations and constraints for why it needs to remain in place.

The workgroup also discussed changing the paint color. The group did not reach consensus about a color and decided it would be better to revisit the topic once the project is closer to completion and the other black-painted elements (e.g., light and signal poles, trolley wire poles, electrical cabinets, transit canopies, etc.) are installed. The workgroup will meet one more time later in the year to finalize a recommendation about paint color.

Dave pointed out that the signs are reflective and will not be lit using any type of external lighting.

Dave shared additional context about why Sign Bridge #2 needs to stay and what's unique about this location. Sign Location #2 was the most technically challenging location. There is a total of nine travel lanes on the lid (five going north and four going south), versus only six at location #1. Given the size and complexity of this interchange, the manual on traffic control devices requires the signs to be overhead instead of on the side of the road. This makes it almost impossible to have another structure to support all the signs across the nine-lane distance. A mast arm or cantilever simply wouldn't work here given the distance the arm would need to span to reach those middle lanes. The distance it needs to span from the structure's base out to the middle of the lid is too far and wouldn't withstand the needed weight and wind loads.

Additionally, Sign Bridge #2 is structurally anchored into the Montlake lid, not in the ground. The sign bridge is integrated into the design of the lid. Removing and replacing Sign Bridge #2 would be technically difficult. For comparison, the mast arms at locations #1 and #3 will be embedded in poured concrete footings about 20-30 feet deep.

Questions

- **Question:** With the size of the signs reduced, can you also reduce the bulkiness of the sign bridge?
Answer: No. Given the distance it needs to span, the bulk of the structure is needed for the structure to handle the increased load itself, and not the weight of the signs.
- **Question:** You have a three-foot median in the middle of the road between north and southbound traffic. Can you put side-mounted signs there?
Answer: We need the signs to be directly over the lanes. In addition, side-mounted signs need to be installed three feet behind the curb to account for larger trucks and provide a "clear zone" (an area without obstructions on the side of the roadway) for drivers. Given the current configuration, we don't have enough space to accommodate the three feet required on both sides of the signs if we put them in the middle of the roadway.
- **Comment:** I'm concerned about the cost. \$750,000 seems a like a lot and this money could be put to better use.
- **Question:** Given that we're stuck with Sign Bridge #2, have considerations been made for landscaping? Can we plant larger trees? Can we make it look prettier?
Answer: We discussed this at the workgroup. With regards to color, that's partly why the workgroup has agreed to meet again later down the line when more of the other structures and landscaping is complete. There are/will be trees and vegetation planted in this area, however, we do have weight limitations given that the lid is a bridge structure and not solid ground.
- **Question:** I want to echo the appreciation for the workgroup members. Was there any thought about these issues when you were designing the sign structures? Someone needs to be held accountable. Can you lower the sign bridge? If you can't lower it, can you plant fast-growing trees? This used to be a beautiful view and now it's a barren superhighway because of all the trees you've taken out.
Answer: I don't believe we can lower the sign bridge because of clearance issues. We are planting trees and we worked with the city and landscape architects to develop the landscaping plans.

- Question:** What are the height and clearance requirements of the Montlake Bridge?
Answer: There's a minimum clearance requirement for King County Metro's trolley wires. WSDOT's signs need to be above the trolley wires. The bottom of the lowest sign needs to be at least 20 feet above the road.
- Question:** Can you look into lowering the sign bridge? Can you get back to us about whether it can be lowered and, if so, by how much?
Answer: We can technically do it but would be very expensive and likely wouldn't make a significant visual difference. Reducing the vertical height of the signs does not get you a 1:1 reduction in the height of the sign bridge. With the vertical clearance requirements and size of the new signs, we could lower the sign bridge by approximately five feet. Lowering the sign bridge would require fabricating a new one. We'd also have to close the roadway for several days to remove the existing sign bridge and reinstall the new one.
Response: You designed it. It's your job to fix it.
- Question:** I'm concerned about graffiti. What is the surface paint on the sign bridge? Can graffiti be removed easily?
Answer: We need to check the paint.
Follow up answer: The sign bridge is powder coated and slick to the touch, which provides some protection from graffiti. The graffiti can be painted over if needed. There isn't a lot of surface area for graffiti, this hopefully reduces the desire for tagging.
- Question:** Who is responsible for maintaining graffiti?
Answer: The responsibility of graffiti removal depends on location of the graffiti. WSDOT has a maintenance agreement with the City of Seattle for the Montlake improvements. We need to check to see if the sign bridge is the state or the city's responsibility. We'll get back to you.
Follow up answer: It is WSDOT's responsibility to maintain the sign bridges. This includes graffiti removal.
- Question:** I'm concerned about the project renderings. They show how things will look in the future, but they are not reflective of what we see on the ground. I think inaccurate renderings contributed to part of this issue in the first place. For example, the rendering shows landscaping on this corner, but on the ground, we're seeing a concrete wall.
Answer: We're not sure what location you're talking about. We'll follow up with you.
Follow up answer: We develop these types of renderings to give the community a general sense of how things will look once the project is done. They're not intended to be 100% accurate. We recognize there are gaps or slight inaccuracies between the rendering and what's on the ground – and that may cause confusion. We try to strike the right balance so the renderings are clear and not overly cluttered. Inevitably, some items get left off and aren't shown. For example, this rendering does not include the Metro trolley wires. The overhead wires are a project element, but they were not included on the visualization to avoid cluttering the image. The area referred to during the meeting is located by the old Montlake Market property. On the rendering, that area shows a grassy planting strip. However, that area between the roadway and the sidewalk will have a concrete traffic barrier instead.
- Question:** I have a budget follow up question. Does the \$750,000 include everything?
Answer: Yes. The estimate is to package the design contract, procure the materials and install the structures. It also includes money for repainting Sign Bridge #2 if the workgroup decides to make that recommendation later this year.

Sign Location #3

Angie transitioned to Sign Location #3 near E Hamlin Street. Rachel shared that the workgroup's recommendations for this location weren't much different to the recommendations for Sign Location #1. Their recommendations include:

- Replace the planned sign bridge with a new, black-painted mast arm.
- Install smaller signs supported by the new mast arm.

- Add an advance I-5 sign on an existing luminaire pole between E Hamlin Street and E Shelby Street.

Questions

- **Question:** The right-hand lane (showing the right hand turn to eastbound SR 520) is also the right turn lane for westbound SR 520 (and I-5). Do you think people are going to be confused if they don't notice the earlier advanced sign?

Answer: The advanced sign is for I-5. There will also be another sign directing people to turn right for I-5 and 520 west. The turn for eastbound SR 520 is at the next turn.

Response: I'm still confused. If it's dark and rainy and there are buses, bikes and pedestrians, drivers won't have a lot of time to figure out what to do.

Answer: The visualization is just a cross-section snapshot at Sign Location #3. What you don't see on the visualization is that there are several additional signs further south and north showing people where to access the westbound and eastbound SR 520 on-ramps.

- **Question:** Do you have an artistic rendering of what the advance signs will look like?

Answer: We don't have those renderings with us. We can follow up.

Follow up answer: The sign below will be mounted on the west side of Montlake Boulevard to notify southbound drivers of the westbound SR 520 on-ramp. The sign will be located just to the north of the on-ramp, between the on-ramp and Sign Location #3. The red arrow below indicates the sign's approximate location.



- **Question:** What's the timeline for having a sign from southbound Montlake Boulevard to westbound SR 520 installed?

Answer: We'll take a look and get back to you.

Follow up answer: We're tentatively looking at the March or April timeframe to have both north- and southbound signs up for the westbound on-ramp.

- **Question:** I'm an occasional bicyclist. It seems more dangerous to be on a bicycle than before because the scale of the project is bigger. The turning lane onto westbound SR 520 is another point where we must cross. Who have you been working with to establish signage to ensure safety of bicyclists and pedestrians?

Answer: Part of this project involved looking at opportunities to separate non-motorist and motorist travel, such as the new bicycle and pedestrian bridge across SR 520, and the new bicycle and pedestrian tunnel under Montlake Boulevard. These new connections will separate non-motorized users from traffic on Montlake Boulevard and give bicyclists and pedestrians different options without needing to cross the roadway. We'll follow up with you about who at the city we worked with. This would be a good question to discuss further during the open house portion of the meeting.

Additionally, as discussed in the workgroup meetings, there will also be more pedestrian crossing signals.

Follow up: We worked with SDOT's bicycle and pedestrian representatives during design development. We also provided briefings to the city of Seattle's Bicycle Advisory Board and Pedestrian Advisory Board.

Additionally, in terms of bicycle and pedestrian safety, WSDOT tried to reduce pedestrian crossing distances where feasible, particularly at the westbound on-ramp to SR 520. The ramp's

previous configuration allowed drivers to turn onto the ramp at high speeds. As part of the project, we've rebuilt that on-ramp so that drivers need to turn at a 90-degree angle upon entering the ramp. This slows drivers down and improves pedestrian safety.

- **Question:** I want assurance that Section 106 requirements are being followed. Can we get confirmation on the record that lights won't be on the structures?

Answer: There will be no lights on the sign structures. There's no need because we are using reflective sign material. That's WSDOT's current design standard. We can document in the meeting summary that lights will not go up on the structure. Cassie Manetas, our Section 106 lead, participated in the workgroup and is helping us ensure we're in compliance with Section 106.

Part 4 – Next steps and implementation

Angie reviewed next steps. She underscored that the recommendations depend on legislative funding. In the spring, interim signage will be needed. That means that the smaller signs will be put on the existing sign bridges temporarily. The communications team will develop a summary that provides an overview of this process and plan for implementation (assuming funding is secured).

Part 5 – Q&A

- **Written question:** Thanks for sign improvements. I'm still very concerned about Sign Location #3 and access to westbound SR 520. I think you need a small sign at the on-ramp directing drivers to westbound SR 520 and I-5. There is no sign right now and that turn will be easily missed.
Follow up response: At the end of the project there will be two signs on the west side of the roadway informing drivers about the westbound SR 520 and I-5 on-ramp. One sign will be near the NOAA driveway and another sign will be further north on an existing light pole north of E Hamlin Street.
- **Written question:** Coming north to south over Montlake Bridge, I will encounter two right turns. I will see two signs, each with one right turn. Please provide one sign with two right turns.
Follow up response: We have designed and provided signs according to the requirements of MUTCD that clearly provide signing for both eastbound and westbound SR 520.
- **Written question:** Can you confirm where the northbound bus-only lane merges back into general traffic?
Follow up response: The northbound bus-only lane on the lid merges back into general traffic at E Shelby Street.

Part 6 – Close and transition to open house

David Goldberg closed out the meeting by thanking everyone for participating. He said the workgroup members really committed to the process. His colleagues at WSDOT dug deep and stretched themselves to be flexible and creative about solutions. He appreciated that we were able to have such a constructive process.

Angie explained how the open house portion of the meeting would flow. There were five separate stations with both agency representatives stationed at each to answer questions (see room layout below).

