

CITY COUNCIL AGENDA MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT:

East Link: Downtown Bellevue alignment alternatives and City Council preferences

STAFF CONTACT:

Diane Carlson, Director of Intergovernmental Relations, 452-4225

City Manager's Office

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Transportation Department

FISCAL IMPACT:

N/A

POLICY ISSUES:

The City Council has had an ongoing discussion of the East Link light rail project since 2006. In February 2009, in response to the East Link Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), the City Council recommended the C2T alternative, which would be a tunnel under Main Street, 106th Avenue Northeast, and Northeast 6th Street. This alternative would provide stations at East Main (Main Street/112th Avenue), the Bellevue Transit Center (Northeast 6th Street/108th Avenue Northeast), and the Hospital Station (former Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad right of way/Northeast 8th Street).

In recent months the City Council has indicated an interest in reconsidering its alignment preference for the downtown Bellevue area ("Segment C"), as has the Sound Transit Board of Directors. As a result, Sound Transit and City of Bellevue staff evaluated four new downtown Bellevue alternatives during December and January. In February, Council, the Sound Transit Board of Directors, and the public reviewed this evaluation and began debate regarding preferences.

Major policy considerations related to each of the alternatives focus on their compatibility with the continued growth of downtown Bellevue, including: the location of stations in proximity to current and projected employment and residential concentrations; urban design integration; traffic operations; construction impacts; and cost. Sound Transit and City staff briefed the City Council on these issues throughout January and February.

The Bellevue City Council has adopted a body of light rail policy (including light rail best practices policies adopted in August 2008, other Comprehensive Plan policies, and Council interest statements) that articulates community values related to the development of light rail in Bellevue. This body of policy work provides guidance and support for light rail transit investments in Bellevue and is complementary to the information provided by Sound Transit's

December 2008 East Link DEIS and the joint Sound Transit – City of Bellevue January 2010
Downtown Bellevue Light Rail Alternatives Concept Design Report.

The City Council has articulated its preferences regarding the East Link project through its communications to Sound Transit, amendments to the Comprehensive Plan, and other actions. These City actions provide the basis for addressing project issues cooperatively with Sound Transit.

DIRECTION NEEDED FROM COUNCIL:

- Action
- Discussion
- Information

The Bellevue City Council and Sound Transit Board of Directors have agreed to reconsider East Link light rail alignment alternatives and preferences for the downtown Bellevue portion of the project (“Segment C”). Over the course of the past several months new alternatives have been proposed, evaluated, and discussed. The City Council has a timely opportunity on March 22 to weigh in on this issue by stating its current preferences and making a recommendation to the Sound Transit Board of Directors. The Sound Transit Board of Directors is expected to reconsider its downtown Bellevue alignment preference next month, with a decision anticipated on April 22.

At the City Council’s March 15 Study Session, Council provided direction for staff to develop a letter communicating the Council’s preference for the C9T alternative in downtown Bellevue and a commitment to work with Sound Transit to close the funding gap. A draft letter is provided as **Attachment 1** for Council action at the March 22 Study Session.

BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS:

Segment C Alternatives Background

On February 23, 2009 the Council selected a preferred East Link alignment and recommended it to the Sound Transit Board of Directors for its consideration. This decision was made after several months of intense Council deliberation and extensive public input, two years of detailed project work and a year of policy deliberation through the Bellevue Light Rail Best Practices effort. On May 14, 2009 the Sound Transit Board of Directors identified a preferred alternative for the East Link project. This preference, and all other alternatives that have been studied to date, will continue to be evaluated in the East Link Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) that is expected to be completed in late 2010. Concurrently, the preferred alternative is being advanced through preliminary engineering, with the exception of Downtown Bellevue, where Sound Transit has suspended preliminary engineering work pending the selection of the preferred alternative.

The Sound Transit Board of Directors’ motion of May 2009 identifying their preferred alternative included several components that require City action by early 2010. For the downtown Bellevue segment, the City is expected to:

- Develop a financing plan with Sound Transit for a downtown tunnel alternative;
- Join Sound Transit in a peer review of the downtown at-grade alternative (C4A couplet).

In October and November briefings, Sound Transit introduced additional downtown alternatives developed in response to revised financial forecasts and based on input from the at-grade peer review panel and the value analysis workshop. These new alternatives included a shorter downtown tunnel (C9T) and two shorter at-grade options (C9A and C11A), all exiting downtown and crossing I-405 at NE 6th Street. In early December, Council requested that Sound Transit also evaluate an elevated option along 114th Avenue Northeast (C14E). In mid-December, the Sound Transit Board directed staff to conduct additional evaluation of these four alternatives and articulated their intent to reconsider the downtown Bellevue preferred alternative by spring 2010.

In December and January, Sound Transit and City staff developed the *Downtown Bellevue Light Rail Alternatives Concept Design Report*. This effort included refining the alternatives, defining evaluation criteria, developing visual simulations and technical data, and compiling the report.

On February 11, the Sound Transit Board and the Bellevue City Council held a joint meeting to review and discuss the analysis contained in the *Downtown Bellevue Light Rail Alternatives Concept Design Report*. At that meeting the Sound Transit Board of Directors and Bellevue City Council directed their staffs to develop a funding strategy to enable the 110th Avenue NE (C9T) alternative. They also directed their respective staffs to develop a work plan that would allow both bodies to work towards mutual agreement on a preferred Segment C alternative.

On February 16, the City Council reviewed the February 11 presentation and requested additional detail on traffic and ridership-related issues for the C segment alternatives. Additionally, Council discussed south Bellevue issues and requested clarification of several routing and environmental issues.

On February 22, the City Council again discussed the East Link downtown Bellevue alignment choices. Bellevue staff presented and discussed the results of additional traffic analysis in detail and elaborated on the relation of the alignment choices to projected downtown growth. Staff also presented and discussed the results of a City-initiated consultant review of Sound Transit's cost estimate for the C9T alternative.

The March 1 and March 8 City Council discussions of East Link focused on the Bel-Red (Segment D) and south Bellevue (Segment B) portions of the project.

At the March 15 City Council Study Session, Staff provided the information and analysis for each of the C segment alternatives and concluded that the C9T alternative best met established city objectives. Staff also reviewed funding concepts for the C9T alternatives. Council discussed the merits of the C9T alternative and directed the City Manager to draft a letter for Council discussion and approval on March 22 identifying C9T as the City's preferred alternative, committing to working with Sound Transit to close the funding gap and continuing to work out design issues to address community impacts.

A tentative schedule for East Link discussions and decisions is provided again below for Council information:

March	Description/Activity
3/15	Council presentation/discussion of C segment alternative, and discussion of Council recommendation for C segment
3/22	Council approval of letter identifying C9T as the preferred alternative for downtown Bellevue
3/25	Sound Transit Board East Link Update
April	
4/8	Sound Transit Capital Projects Committee
4/22	Tentative date for Sound Transit Board decision on preferred option for C segment

ATTACHMENTS

- 1) Draft letter to Sound Transit Board identifying C9T as the City’s preferred alternative for Downtown Bellevue



March 22, 2010

The Honorable Aaron Reardon, Chair
Sound Transit Board of Directors
401 South Jackson Street
Seattle, WA 98104

Re: Updated East Link Downtown Bellevue Alignment Preference for C9T

Dear Chair Reardon,

On behalf of the Bellevue City Council I am writing to inform the Board that the Council has identified the 110th Avenue Northeast Tunnel (C9T) as the City's updated preliminary preferred alternative for Downtown Bellevue. The Council greatly appreciates the cooperative efforts of the Sound Transit Board and staff over the past year to continue to work on solutions for Downtown Bellevue. This work led to the development of the C9T alternative, a more affordable and workable option that meets the needs of Bellevue and the region and has unified support from the Bellevue Council and the downtown Bellevue business community.

The principles adopted by the Bellevue City Council last year to guide the alignment decision for downtown Bellevue remain true today. Based on Bellevue's light rail policy principles, the experiences of other cities with light rail systems, Bellevue's Light Rail Best Practices Report, Comprehensive Plan policies, the *Downtown Bellevue Light Rail Alternatives Concept Design Report*, and further traffic analysis, the C9T alternative best meets the needs of the city and the region. C9T most effectively addresses important City objectives by:

- Providing a grade separated light rail system;
- Serving the downtown Bellevue core;
- Improving the operational reliability of light rail;
- Providing the highest ridership of all of the new downtown alternatives;
- Maximizing the value and providing capacity for long term expansion of the system; and
- Eliminating street impacts (particularly impacts on the southeast portion of Downtown), thus preserving the value and capacity of the city's street system, both in 2030 and long term.

The Council recognizes that identifying a solid funding solution for the additional projected cost of C9T as compared to other alternatives is a major concern for the Board. As a result of developing the shorter tunnel route (C9T), and through the joint work of Sound Transit and the City to identify less expensive ways to accomplish this tunnel, the funding gap has been significantly reduced from the gap first identified last year to an amount that we are confident makes C9T achievable. As a result of the discussions following the joint Board and Council meeting on February 11th, should the Board select C9T as the preliminary preferred alternative, the City commits to working cooperatively with Sound Transit through design, permitting and construction to fully close the funding gap and to successfully accomplish this project. Specifically, the City is prepared to commit to local actions that will result in reduced risk and cost of the C9T alternative to Sound Transit. The estimated contribution ranges in value from

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\$104 million to \$150 million. For example, the City envisions the following types of local cost reduction/contributions:

- Access to City property and rights-of-way at no cost;
- Contributing one-time tax revenues that would be received by the City as a result of the East Link project;
- In-kind services, such as streamlined permitting assistance; and
- Assuming responsibility for specific East Link capital projects that provide mutual benefit to the City.

While there is still much work to be done to determine the actual final cost of C9T with greater certainty, with this City commitment, in combination with actions such as scope reductions, and other financial tools, including the potential for additional federal funds, the C9T alternative appears affordable.

We recognize that there are contingencies included in the cost estimate at this early stage of project development. With our continued commitment to work collaboratively with Sound Transit, we expect to identify additional cost reductions for the project as it moves forward through more detailed design, value engineering, and station area planning, which would benefit both the City and Sound Transit. In addition to seeking cost savings, another objective for the Council is to reduce community impacts by considering the best fit for East Link entering into downtown Bellevue. We understand there will be additional opportunities to work through specific designs with Sound Transit to accomplish this as the project continues to advance.

Again, the Council appreciates the Board's support for taking a collaborative approach to responding to our community's issues and concerns. We believe the C9T alternative is the most promising option for Sound Transit and the City because it maximizes the long term value for the regional light rail system and for Bellevue. The Council encourages the Sound Transit Board to identify C9T as the locally preferred alternative and look forward to working through the details of the alignment and funding strategy with Sound Transit to make C9T a reality.

Sincerely,

Don Davidson, DDS
Mayor

cc: Sound Transit Board
Bellevue City Council
Steve Sarkozy, City Manager
Goran Sparrman, Transportation Director
Matt Terry, Planning and Community Development Director