



LAKE TO BAY LOOP

Connecting Elliott Bay to South Lake Union

The Lake to Bay Loop will create beautiful, easy and safe urban walking experiences, accessible to all, filled with surprise and delight, and rich with art, history and culture. This network will link the growing populations of Belltown, South Lake Union, and Uptown Urban Centers.

The Lake to Bay Loop will focus on pedestrians, but also feature well-designed transportation routes for recreational bicycles, providing streetscape amenities, safe, comfortable passage and areas for rest. It will connect four spectacular public open spaces: Myrtle Edwards Park, Olympic Sculpture Park, Seattle Center, and Lake Union Park. By making use of the public right of way, the Loop will extend those spaces into the public realm, forge new east-west connections, and become a wonderful open space in and of itself. With improved streetscape connections recognized as an important part of three neighborhood plans, the network will realize key desires expressed in those plans. As a regional facility, it will strive to be responsive to the larger community of stakeholders. The route will be a functional, pedestrian-oriented transportation link and pay tribute to the history of the area. The Lake to Bay Loop will provide significant health benefits by encouraging walking and bicycling in the urban core which in turn can reduce the health threats associated with diabetes, heart disease and other associated chronic diseases.

The idea is particularly compelling now as major transportation planning for the area is well underway and important benchmark decisions will soon be made. Transportation plans are in process for the Mercer Corridor and SR 99 Alaskan Way Bored Tunnel North Portal projects, and major urban design decisions on both projects are anticipated in the coming year. The City of Seattle Bicycle Master Plan was completed in 2008, and the Pedestrian Master Plan was released in September 2009. In addition, the Seattle Center Century 21 Master Plan was adopted in 2008, and promises to reclaim nearly 10 acres of open space at the north end of downtown for expanded public recreational use. Also, Lake Union Park will be completed in summer 2010, the Cheshiahud Lake Union Loop is undergoing a second phase of improvements, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation world headquarters is under construction across from Seattle Center along the route. The concurrent culmination of these recent or ongoing planning efforts suggests an opportune time to elevate the Lake to Bay Loop.

Background

Early History

Potlatch Trail

The idea of a link between Lake Union, Seattle Center and Elliott Bay has been considered for many years, going back to a concept developed in the 1970's of an "Entertainment Crescent" connecting these areas with Pioneer Square. More recently in 2001, the idea of the "Potlatch Trail" was discussed and developed collaboratively by Seattle Center and Department of Planning and Development, not only as a way of linking these spectacular open spaces, but as a way to celebrate the rich heritage of this area.

Seattle Commons Plan

During the planning process for the Seattle Commons in the 1990s, most of the park design alternatives included links across Aurora Ave. These ranged from a bike and pedestrian bridge across Aurora at Roy St, to a shared (bikes/pedestrians/vehicles) Roy St. underpass, to an exclusive bike/pedestrian overpass from the old bus barn (Mercer St. & 5th Ave. N), over Aurora Ave, Dexter St. and Roy St, spiraling down to grade at 8th Ave, just north of Roy St. Although the Seattle Commons proposal failed in public votes in 1995 and 1996, the idea of a trail survived.

Neighborhood Planning Process

During 1998 and 1999, three distinct neighborhood plans emerged for north downtown and were developed and adopted for Queen Anne/Uptown, Belltown/Denny Regrade and South Lake Union. Updates to these neighborhood plans will be conducted over the next five years. Elements of the original concept for the Potlatch Trail can be found in each of these plans:

Queen Anne/Uptown Neighborhood Plan, June 1998

"Develop the proposed "Potlatch Trail" system between South Lake Union (Westlake Trail) and Seattle Center. The trail will cross Aurora Avenue N. at Roy Street and continue on streets to Seattle Center. Make certain bicycle facilities are provided for bicycle commuting." (QAT63); "Construct a pedestrian and bicycle tunnel under Aurora Avenue N at Roy Street to link non-motorized facilities of the Potlatch Trail on the east side of Aurora to those on the west." (QAT64); "Interconnect between the Potlatch Trail at Seattle Center and Unocal Property near Elliott Bay via 2nd Ave and Broad Street Route. Complete the Potlatch Trail system through Seattle Center to exit at 2nd Ave N to Broad Street to the waterfront at Broad Street to meet the regional bicycle system near Myrtle Edwards Park." (QAT65); "Create a bicycle/pedestrian crossing of Elliott Avenue W. and the BNSF RR tracks to link the Urban Center to the Elliott Bay shoreline and regional bicycle trails." (QAT44).

Belltown/Denny Regrade Neighborhood Plan, December, 1998

“Green Streets and Open Space Connections Strategy seeks to improve Green Streets within the community and to improve and enhance connections to Open Spaces outside, but near the neighborhood, most notably the Myrtle Edwards Park and Seattle Center.”; “Designate Clay Street, Eagle Street and Bay Streets as Green Streets.”; “Require a pedestrian connection to the waterfront through any future development of the vacant lots (Unocal site) on the western end of Eagle Street. Recommend a private pedestrian overpass be installed over the railroad tracks to complete the connection from the Seattle Center to the waterfront and Myrtle Edwards Park.”; “Improve pedestrian connections between the Regrade and the Seattle Center by connecting with the KOMO TV improvements at 4th and 5th Avenues and Denny Way, and connecting the waterfront to the Seattle Center via Eagle Street as a continuation of the Potlatch Trail.”

South Lake Union Neighborhood Plan, October 1998

“Construct a Roy Street undercross or over cross of Aurora for vehicles, bicycles and pedestrians.” The Potlatch Trail, therefore, is more than a modern attempt to recreate a historical connection between the Lake, the Meadow and the Bay. It is also the fulfillment of the desires expressed in three neighborhood plans, which will provide both a functional transportation link, and a tribute to the history of the area.

Recent History

Seattle Center Century 21 Master Plan

Starting in 2006, Seattle Center began developing its future vision and long range master plan for the evolving campus over the next 20 years. The Century 21 Master Plan was finalized and approved in August 2008. Early implementation projects are already underway at the perimeter of the campus, including the Broad Street Green (Phase I), new Skatepark and Theater Commons. Campus signage upgrades are also planned for 2010.

Transportation Plans

Longstanding plans for the redevelopment of Mercer Corridor East through South Lake Union have been in development since 2004 and will move ahead in to construction starting in 2010, Designs for Mercer West will follow and are anticipated to get underway in early 2010, targeting a construction start for 2012. The Viaduct Bored Tunnel North Portal is well into design and envisions east-west surface connections across SR 99 on John, Thomas and Harrison Streets. In addition, citywide Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plans were developed in recent years by SDOT with considerable community involvement and implementation has begun on related early priority projects.

Park Plans

Lake Union Park Master Plan was developed in 2006 and the Cheshiahud Lake Union Loop was developed in follow up in 2009. The Olympic Sculpture Park opened in 2007 as a collaboration between the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) and The Trust for Public Land. Opportunity Fund projects for the Pro Parks Levy will be identified in early 2010 and the next phase of Lake to Bay Loop design is a prospective candidate.

The Trail Experience

The Lake to Bay Loop will be an unparalleled urban walking experience. Unlike the Burke Gilman Trail that has its own dedicated right-of-way, the Lake to Bay Loop can utilize both public sidewalks and public open spaces, and private development wherever possible, to create the trail width. People walking along the trail will cross streets at signalized intersections, and cross Aurora Avenue at grade, via street bridges, or using the redesigned Mercer St. underpass. They will walk along busy streets, stroll quiet streets and longer stretches of richly planted avenues, always aware of the urban context surrounding them. The Loop experience will vary along the different sections of the route. Consistent use of proposed Design Principles in this document will unite the trail sections into a recognizable whole.

The Fast Bike Facility

While the focus of the trails is an inviting and safe walking experience, that experience can only be realized if a well designed facility for faster cyclists is also provided – one which attracts those users to an alternate and expedient route from Lake Union Park to Seattle Center, Myrtle Edwards Park and the Olympic Sculpture Park. Lacking such a facility, faster cyclists will try to move through Seattle Center and the Olympic Sculpture Park, where they are not allowed or will use the trail, creating a less than pleasant, and perhaps dangerous, experience for people walking. Designated bicycle routes and bicycle lanes adjacent to the Loop as well as signage can enhance the cycling connections between South Lake Union Urban Center, Uptown Urban Center, Belltown, and Seattle's soon to be reinvigorated Waterfront. The 2008 Seattle Bicycle Master Plan provides a good early framework for bicyclists to better navigate the general area. Instead of designating a primary east-west fast bike route, it identifies several possible on-street routes.

Design Principles

Design Philosophy

The Lake to Bay Loop must strive to further:

A sense of place - a love of place that honors local climate, topography, vegetation, building materials, community character and cultural heritage.

A sense of nature - key to vitality and sustainability, knowledge learned from ecological systems that create natural order and meaning.

A sense of history - both architecturally and culturally, to find themes, ideas, stories, design principles, beauty and pleasure that rhyme across temporal limits and reinforce a sense of place.

A sense of connection – improving East-West neighborhood connections and easing access to and through public open spaces along the routes with pedestrian safety in mind.

A sense of craft - use of carefully chosen, substantial materials, combined with esthetics and craftsmanship needed to develop an elegant, thoughtful and place-based design.

A sense of scale - a human scale within the larger public realm that use boundaries to create intervals and emphasizes a sense of orientation, clear circulation, belonging and welcome.

A sense of legibility - of clearly defined spaces that preserve treasured places, places of beauty, open space and special views that create a spatially coherent and cohesive sense of place and neighborhood and preserves the dynamism of the urban experience.

Values

Values that govern all great public spaces should guide this effort: environmental stewardship, social equity, community engagement, economic opportunity, maximization of health benefits, and government effectiveness.

Consistency

This project must be consistent with adopted plans, including first and foremost the neighborhood plans of three communities: South Lake Union, Belltown/Denny Regrade and Uptown/Queen Anne. It must align with citywide planning efforts, such as the City of Seattle's Comprehensive Plan, the Parks Comprehensive Plan, the Transportation Strategic Plan, , the 2007 Seattle Bicycle Master Plan, the 2009 Seattle Pedestrian Master Plan, Metro Transit plans, the City's Open Space 2100 Strategy and Seattle Parks Foundation's Bands of Green report. In addition, the project must also be compatible with the Seattle Center Century 21 Master Plan, released in August 2008.

Compatibility

Utilize in compatible ways the numerous new and planned bike and pedestrian connections at Seattle Center, Olympic Sculpture Park, Mercer Corridor, W. Thomas Waterfront Connection, and the reconstituted street grid between South Lake Union and Uptown Urban Centers.

The Walking Experience

Create an accessible multi-use trail network that invites travel on foot, in wheelchairs, by slow moving bicycles and other similar uses. Enhance the experience with rest stops, interpretive elements, integrated art and interest points (e.g. kiosks, wayfinding) allowing all to feel welcome and able to traverse the corridor. Allow for temporal and spatial quiet spaces. Acknowledge the walking experience as the highest priority for the trail network.

Make key connections across existing barriers:

- Under, at-grade and/or over Aurora Avenue;
- Across the Burlington Northern train tracks at a minimum of two locations , at the proposed Thomas St Pedestrian Bridge and at the existing bridge within the Olympic Sculpture Park; and
- Where the multi-use trail parallels a street, separate it from the street by curbs, landscaping, signage and pavement treatments.

Provide a safe, accessible walking experience by:

- Minimizing potential conflicts between pedestrians and bicyclists;
- Using signed and painted or textured crosswalks where the trail crosses streets;
- Enhancing safety by promoting a “see and be seen” design.
- Reinforcing Seattle Center campus goals for improved pedestrian access to and through the Center, especially east-west connections, as outlined in the Century 21 Master Plan.

The Bicycling Experience

- Recognizing the Loop is a part of creating vital east-west connections for cyclists, work with the recommendations of the Bicycle Master Plan to create both commuter and recreational cyclist alternatives.
- Accommodate fast bicycle traffic primarily through on-street, striped bicycle lanes.
- Utilize signage to route cyclists around the Seattle Center campus and Olympic Sculpture Park or instruct them to dismount and walk their bicycles through these public spaces.

- At points of potential congestion (e.g., interpretive sites, street furniture, street crossings, etc.) provide waysides and standing room to avoid pedestrian/bicyclist conflicts.

Overarching Design Principles

- Provide bike and pedestrian route signage using the international standards of design and symbology in appropriate sizes to the local situation and utilize existing Center City wayfinding signs.
- Provide adequate lighting of the bike and pedestrian rights of way where it is missing.
- Segregate slow travel, fast bicycle and motor vehicle traffic by separate routes where possible, or by clear and creative signage, barriers and pavement treatments where separate routing is neither feasible nor desirable (i.e. underpass, overpass).
- Seek opportunities to route the trail along streets where one or more lanes of traffic can be removed and the resulting right-of-way dedicated to exclusive use by the trail or where traffic can be calmed to provide a more enjoyable trail experience.
- Develop conditions, incentives or requirements for private development occurring along the routes to provide trail amenities such as wide setbacks, non-conflicting building entrances, and streetscape enhancements as part of the development.
- Provide bike storage and maintenance facilities at key points along the Lake to Bay Loop, including the new Bike Corral and Multimodal Transportation Center planned for the east edge of Seattle Center under the new green lid that will replace Memorial Stadium.
- Provide transit information at appropriate transit connections.
- Good engineering invites right use. Use routing, trail design and pavement treatments to facilitate proper use by all.
- Design the trail routes to enhance the neighborhoods it goes through and enliven the public spaces along the routes.
- Encourage services along the Loop targeted to its users, acknowledging the needs of both visitors and residents.
- Transitions are confusing to users - keep to a minimum the number of changes and turns in route design.

Implementation

The creation of the Lake to Bay Loop will be an incremental process, spanning many years. Timing will be subject to several considerations such as private development opportunities, public and quasi-public project implementation and funding opportunities. Although an incremental process, it will not be temporary - all work will be lasting, and the parts will eventually connect into a unified and recognizable whole. For this reason, schematic design should begin immediately so that it can serve to guide the building of the portions of the trail that will come from many disparate projects. Schematic design will include a plan for art, and the artistic elements will be integrated into the design and funding of each portion of the trail. An outline of potential implementation phases follows below:

Schematic Design of the Lake to Bay Loop: will require six months and be completed by the end of 2010. An outside design consultant with possible assistance from the Urban Design staff at SDOT and DPD, Parks, Seattle Center and the Mayor's Office staff will work with a group of community and neighborhood partners to produce the document and circulate it for review.

Early Implementation – Beginning in 2010, create the Art and Graphic elements that provide immediate recognition and encourage use of the trail network as it is developed. Projects might include a signage and way finding system, treating the route's sidewalks with unique patterns or colors, applying patterns or textures to curbs and children's artwork projects. Early design work, focus groups and mapping projects would help identify favorite spots; physical features and topography could be used to highlight thematic elements for the trail. Some segments may be accelerated over others, depending on funding priorities. Several blocks of Broad Street and Thomas Street are likely candidates for early implementation. Seattle Center will want to lead the development of the Loop on its campus and at its edges.

In addition, many elements are already funded and in process such as the Thomas Street Overpass, the Mercer East and West Projects, and the north portal of the Highway 99 bored tunnel. As these public projects, and the many private developments along the route, are finalized and built, portions of the Lake to Bay Loop should be a key part of their construction.