

[Documents Reveal Fix Was In for Deep-Bore Tunnel](http://publicola.net/?p=16697)

by Erica C. Barnett, 10/23/2009, 11:50 AM

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Public records from the state Department of Transportation (WSDOT), available [here](http://scatnow.com/index_files/Factsnfictionspage2.htm), contain a number of disturbing revelations about the process that led WSDOT to move forward with the deep-bore tunnel on the downtown waterfront early this year.

Emails, internal memos, and other agency documents reveal that WSDOT appointed longtime advocates for the deep-bore tunnel as “experts” on tunnel costs; redistributed tunnel costs to make the price appear lower; and failed to study the surface/transit/I-5 alternative, subbing in a faux four-lane “surface” alternative that included none of the transit and surface-street improvements in the surface/transit/I-5 proposal.



The records come from a massive public-disclosure request filed by Seattle Citizens Against the Tunnel, which is [suing the state](http://publicola.net/?p=15595) over the tunnel project, arguing that WSDOT is illegally moving forward with the tunnel before completing a state-mandated environmental review.

Among the information revealed in the records released by WSDOT:

• The state Department of Transportation relied heavily on outside advice from the Cascadia Center, the transportation wing of the Discovery Institute, to come up with estimates of how much to include for risk and contingency in the budget for the tunnel. Cascadia has been pushing for the deep-bore tunnel for years; back in the summer of 2007, Cascadia director Bruce Agnew penned an editorial for the *Puget Sound Business Journal* outlining “[our plan](http://www.discovery.org/a/4158)” to replace the Alaskan Way Viaduct: A deep-bore tunnel. Not surprising, then, that in an email to WSDOT  staff, Agnew concluded: “Our belief is that the deep bored tunnel should proceed.”

Despite this blatant advocacy, WSDOT apparently considered Agnew and Cascadia sufficiently unbiased to serve as an expert adviser to its viaduct replacement team. In an email dated December 23, 2008, WSDOT Urban Corridors Deputy Director Ron Paananen asked viaduct project manager John White and consultant Amy Grotenfendt, “Has anyone heard back from Cascadia? We need their feedback to help in reconsideration of the risk and contingency numbers.”

In an email the following day, Agnew—echoing a Cascadia [press release](http://www.cascadiaprospectus.org/2008/12/myth_making_in_seattle_officia.php) calling early cost estimates for the deep-bore tunnel  “inflated, inaccurate and more myth than reality—sent agency staff another email asserting that the tunnel cost estimate “appears to be significantly higher than any other tunnel project” built previously in the world and suggested that the agency should lower its cost estimates.

That same day, White noted in an email to WSDOT consultants and staff that Cascadia believed its numbers for “add-ons” to the tunnel project (a category that includes risk and cost escalation, $418 million and $166 million, respectively) were too high and suggested lowering the overall cost of the tunnel.

Finally, when state Rep. Geoff Simpson, a tunnel opponent, asked WSDOT “what level of independent review” WSDOT had done on its cost estimates, WSDOT responded, “Cascadia and other tunnel experts have been very active in reviewing the tunnel estimate work to date.”

Among those “other experts”: The global engineering firm Arup. Arup has frequently collaborated with Cascadia, and in 2009 completed a $35,000 report, paid for by Cascadia, that deep-bore tunnels are both [feasible and affordable](http://slog.thestranger.com/slog/archives/2009/04/24/this-is-why-we-dont-want-to-be-on-the-hook-for-viaduct-cost-overruns).

How influential were Cascadia and Arup in WSDOT’s decision to go forward with the tunnel and lower estimates of its cost? Paananen says Cascadia was just one of “a number of different experts,” and that “we didn’t weight their input more heavily than anyone.”

• Speaking of Arup, the firm was mentioned by name in an email from WSDOT’s White to Agnew and Cascadia Projects coordinator Renee Roline. In the email, which seeks Arup’s advice on costs, WSDOT’S White writes, “If a bored tunnel is to advance, there will be plenty of opportunity for Arup and others to further engage in the design process and potentially construction, but ahead of that we need to pull together the best tunnel thinking available related to thoughts on costs and construction options.”

Not quite a promise of a quid pro quo, but it certainly could be read to suggest that Arup should expect design and construction work from WSDOT in the future.  Paananen says the language in the email was “not unusual at all.

“We get lots of inquiries from engineering firms and contractors asking, what are the next pieces of work coming out and what opportunities will there be to bid.” However, that does not appear to be the context in which White made his comments.

• In that same December 23 email exchange, WSDOT urban corridors administrator Dave Dye notes that he has been “getting vibes from New York” that WSDOT’s tunnel cost estimates were “too conservative”—in other words, they included too many contingencies and were generally too high. (WSDOT has a number of  advisers in New York).

Paananen says the “New York” reference could have referred to “any number of folks,” adding, “We were all getting some of that pushback from tunneling experts that our tunnel estimate was high.” He says WSDOT felt confident lowering its estimate once it settled on a single deep-bore tunnel rather than two side-by-side deep-bore tunnels, which have more risks and are more expensive.

Dye then suggests that WSDOT reduce the potential cost range for the tunnel, “with the current estimate [becoming] the high end.” The effect of that change would be to make the overall cost of the tunnel lower. And it appears to contradict another email from Dye, in which he told a group of staffers and consultants that he believed $2.13 billion was “the most probable” estimate, adding, “I’m inclined to say  $2.13 billion is the right figure to build a finance plan around. … We should stick with the $2.13 billion figure.”

On January 6, two weeks later, WSDOT consultant Amy Grotenfendt (originally hired to do public relations and community outreach) wrote in an email, “I changed the cost of the bored tunnel to $1.9 billion since we were moving $100 million down the utilities line.” In other words, the state shifted $100 million to the city’s portion of the funding, allowing WSDOT to shave off that $100 million. Paananen says he thinks the state shifted more then $200 million of the utility relocation costs to the city, but that number doesn’t show up anywhere in the emails.

• In an email dated Jan. 2, 2009, WSDOT consultant Mike Rigsby suggested raising the costs estimates for utility relocation for all the non-bored-tunnel replacement alternatives (from $150 million each for the surface/transit and elevated options to $233 million and $210 million, respectively) and lowering the cost estimate for utility relocation for the bored tunnel, from $152 million to $100 million.

Rigsby does not explain why he suggests those changes, which have the effect of making the deep-bore tunnel look cheaper and the other alternatives more expensive.

And it’s unclear if the changes were made. Paananen says he doesn’t know if WSDOT changed its utility relocation cost estimates, but adds, “I’m not exactly sure where Mike was coming from.”

• The draft EIS makes clear that WSDOT did not bother to study any version of the surface/transit alternative, despite the fact that the Viaduct Stakeholders Group recommended further study of that alternative. Instead, it studied a faux “no build” option, in which the viaduct is simply torn down and nothing done to mitigate the impact of losing that corridor. (In contrast, surface/transit/I-5 includes adding a lane to I-5, improving surface streets downtown and in South Lake Union, and investing hundreds of millions in new transit). Not surprisingly, the analysis found that the “no build” option was not a feasible alternative, with slower travel times, lower transit ridership, and much more traffic on surface streets downtown.

• Although Gov. Christine Gregoire and WSDOT director Paula Hammond have explicitly redefined “capacity” to mean “ability to move people and goods,” not the number of cars a road can hold (a top priority of environmentalists), WSDOT planners refer repeatedly to car capacity as a measure of the quality of the viaduct replacement. In a memo dated December 29, 2008, White said a deep-bored tunnel would “maintain capacity for trips through downtown and provide room for growth in those vehicle trips expected by 2030.” Elsewhere in the documents, a consultant notes that the estimates assumed 10 percent growth in traffic between 2015 and 2030. And a draft environmental impact statement for the tunnel predicts that vehicle-hours traveled downtown will increase by nearly 17,000 a day in the next six years, that travel times will decrease or increase only slightly, and that vehicle miles traveled will increase about 12 percent.

• According to internal WSDOT memos, tunnel construction could have a devastating effect on Pioneer Square.  South of King Street, WSDOT’s consultants recommended building a cut-and-cover tunnel, despite “excessive and difficult utility relocations in 1st Ave., disruptions to traffic,” and threats to “structural underpinnings of adjacent buildings” (AKA the beams and underground walls that hold buildings up). Tunneling in Pioneer Square, in other words, is risky business, and could threaten sidewalks, streets, and buildings.

Paananen acknowledges that “we have to be very careful” in Pioneer Square because of ground conditions there, but says, “The whole deal with risk for us is, identify the risk, then mitigate it.”

• Emails from WSDOT staff make repeated references to saving money by shortening the timeline for construction from nine years  to 7.5. However, WSDOT’s current timeline calls for construction to begin in 2011 and end in 2015. Paanenen attributes the shortened schedule to two factors: the decision to dig one tunnel instead of two, and a switch to a design-build procurement process, in which a single team of firms will both design and build the tunnel.

• On the north end of the tunnel, WSDOT notes that building the deep-bore tunnel would dump an additional 35,000 vehicles in South Lake Union and Queen Anne (the total number of cars entering the tunnel on Western or existing at Battery Street). That’s a huge amount of additional traffic in a neighborhood that’s already saddled with the so-called “Mercer Mess.” In a February email to one of WSDOT’s consultants, Ivar’s CEO Bob Donegan called the traffic situation “a huge issue for the freight guys in Ballard and NW Seattle.”

• The draft environmental impact statement on the tunnel—the document that shows what environmental, traffic, and other impacts the tunnel will have in Seattle and the surrounding areas—contains a note making it clear that WSDOT and its consultants intended to keep the public document from the public. The note reads:

“We respectfully request that the public not be given access to this document because FHWA has determined that this preliminary document is an intergovernmental exchange that may be withheld under the Freedom of Information Act.” (Whoops.) “Premature release of this material to any segment of the public could give some sectors an unfair advantage and would have a chilling effect on intergovernmental coordination and the success of the cooperating agency concept.” Paananen says the agency routinely places that notice on preliminary draft documents, and only formally releases the final draft.