

Disruption and Construction

An inside look at the viaduct planning process

(Not a pretty picture)

Many were surprised when a deep bore tunnel was selected as the preferred way to replace the Alaskan Way Viaduct. But not Brian Scott.

A mediator based in Portland, Oregon, Scott was retained by the region's elected leadership in 2007 to help identify what had gone wrong with the viaduct planning process up to that point and indicate how it might be made right. To do that, Scott conducted in-depth interviews with 55 people engaged in some aspect of viaduct planning.

He conducted the interviews following a highly acrimonious City of Seattle advisory ballot in March 2007, and the interview list included elected officials, top government managers, environmentalists, industrial business owners, civic activists, advocates for the arts, and advocates for bicyclists, as well as representatives for organized labor and downtown business associations.

His report was published in December 2007 and what it portrays is not a pretty picture. It is recounted here because many of the issues that it identifies are still major elements of the political and institutional landscape upon which the viaduct and the deep bore replacement option stand.

The Scott report begins by noting the difficulties posed by Washington's goofy, ad hoc system for planning, funding, managing, building, and maintaining transportation infrastructure. The viaduct poses an institutional challenge that requires collaborative action by the Governor, the Washington State Legislature, the Washington State Department of Transportation, the Mayor, the City Council, the Seattle Department of Transportation, the King County Executive, the King County Council, the King County Department of Transportation, the Port of Seattle CEO, the Port Commission and port staff planners and managers.

Each was and is a major player in addressing a civic puzzle that comes with no playbook or even instructions thanks to our lack of an effective transportation governing system. As the report observes:

“The Viaduct is a State highway built on City land. The State is responsible for capital improvements, the City for routine maintenance. The Viaduct serves both as a regional connector for points north and south and as a local access road. ... Replacing a facility of this magnitude requires massive public funding while resources are limited and there are many competing needs for State highway dollars. ... It is understandable that the process of deciding how to replace the Viaduct would be messy.”

And, boy was it messy. According to the report:

“For a variety of reasons that are variously practical, political, economic, personal, institutional and procedural, the Alaskan Way Viaduct Replacement Program went very wrong in late 2006 and early 2007. It won’t be helpful to elaborate on or analyze those events here, but it is important to recognize that real damage was done to interagency and interpersonal relationships. At the same time, the vast majority of the stakeholders interviewed are begging for coordinated leadership.”

The report also revealed that most citizens believed the government planners were lowballing the issue of construction-related traffic disruption..

Whether it is rebuilt or torn down, the viaduct promises to be one of the most disruptive public construction projects in the history of the state, with high costs for the private sector due its location at the heart of the state’s industrial base. This challenge was compounded by the original selection of a cut-and-cover tunnel to replace the viaduct, because a cut-and-cover tunnel is just about the most disruptive option available.

From the get-go, senior transportation staff downplayed disruption, and they opted to barely even mention the issue in an environmental impact statement that was more than 1,000 pages long. When a group of waterfront business owners paid for their own study of potential disruption, one leader of the viaduct team told a newspaper reporter the businesspeople were “Chicken Littles” afraid the “sky is falling.”

But Scott’s 2007 interviews showed that private sector concern about disruption was very high, and his report concluded that staff handling of the issue had undermined the credibility of the planning effort:

“Analysis of possible solutions must promptly and rigorously address disruption during construction. Strong feedback from many stakeholders indicates that the cost of disruption during construction has not been adequately researched ... [this] ¹undermines the credibility of any conclusions by project planners.”

But if disruption issue was a unifying issue for citizens, the citizenry remained sharply divided about what to build. *“There are some who are fond of the Viaduct’s practicality as a utilitarian piece of infrastructure that supports Seattle’s working waterfront. Most of those interviewed, however, are strongly against a new elevated structure.”*

Most of those interviewed favored the surface option, but many of them conceded it might not work. *“Even those who intuitively believe that [the surface option] is the only workable solution acknowledge that they need to see convincing evidence that it can be fully implemented and that it will work if it is.”*

¹ Square brackets show that the words inside were added by you, and are not in Scott’s original report.

However, surface supporters were also adamantly opposed to building a new viaduct. *“These people are motivated, passionate, influential and prepared to go to extraordinary lengths to keep Seattle from reinvesting in an elevated highway on its waterfront.”*

Not reported was the fact this group included the Mayor and most members of the City Council.

Among its conclusions, the report found:

- *The process to date has lacked adequate interagency and executive communication and cooperation.*
- *While trust is very low and relationships are damaged, the desire for forward movement is overwhelming.*
- *Analysis of possible solutions must promptly and rigorously address disruption during construction.*

Yet disruption was not pursued “promptly” when the planning process resumed, and a new group of citizen stakeholders was brought into the planning loop, The staff team that had lowballed it before left it to the end.

At one of the last meetings of the citizen stakeholder group, an out-of-state economist reported that the different replacement options would all cause just about the same amount of disruption, and there wouldn’t be much disruption, anyway. Disruption might be significant “locally,” he said, but not regionally.

The substance and timing of the disruption report did two things: It created a low boil on a key trust and credibility issue that simmered for the 12 months while the stakeholders waited for the disruption report to appear, and – when the report finally arrived – many stakeholders found it incredibly lame.

Local and regional are often a single entity in the SR99 – Interstate 5 corridor. Disrupt the 230 Boeing suppliers who are local to the viaduct because they are based in Seattle and you impact aircraft assembly lines that are among the largest backbones of the regional economy. Disrupt the Port’s marine cargo facility at Terminal 46, which stands in the shadow of the viaduct, and you disrupt a 12,000-member workforce that spreads the wealth and lives throughout central Puget Sound, to say nothing of diverting an international flow of commerce that stretches from the U.S. Midwest to the eastern shores of Asia.

Many of the stakeholders also disagreed with the staff team when the team recommended that the viaduct be replaced with either a new elevated highway or the surface option. They disagreed as well when the staff team rejected the deep bore tunnel option – the option that would create by far the least construction disruption to the private sector..

Even so, one month after the last strained meeting between them, many of the stakeholders and the staff team were present at a high-fiving press conference where the region's elected leaders announced that a deep bore tunnel would replace the viaduct.

To the public at large, the deep bore option seemed to come from nowhere, and it is now under attack by some who supported the surface option or another elevated highway.

In a recent interview, however, Brian Scott said the deep bore option was nearly inevitable. "After talking with everybody, it was easy to see that's the way this thing was going to go." And, in hindsight, his report makes that pretty clear.

As suspected even by some of its fans, the surface option didn't work. And any effort to build a new elevated highway will lead to a huge, tax-funded legal brawl between city and state elected officials, and if the state won, a new elevated structure would disrupt the regional economy **for 6.5 to 8.5 years** while it is being built..

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On the other hand, as Scott wrote in his 2007 report:

"Tunnel opponents fall into two camps: the first fear cost; the second dread the disruptive impacts of cut-and-cover construction. If people were convinced that a tunnel could be built with limited disruption and at a cost² commensurate with benefit, detractors would be few. Some would object to losing the view from the existing Viaduct. Others would say that building such a major facility to accommodate automobiles is not good for the environment. In the current political environment, however, it is unlikely that either of these perspectives would outweigh widespread support for a seemingly logical answer."

That answer, Scott said in the interview, is the deep bore tunnel. It's not the cheapest solution, but it achieves the highest value because it minimizes disruption.

Scott thinks the deep bore was the wisest choice and he's putting money where his mouth is.

He liked Seattle so much while learning about the viaduct unpleasanties that he took a job offer last year from a company that wanted him to work in its Seattle office. What's more, he bought a condo in one of the high-rises that stands between the viaduct and Elliott Bay.

Of his time studying the political entrails of the viaduct issue, he says "The whole thing was just fascinating. What happened was entirely predictable."

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² Commiserate means share disappointment with; commensurate means basically measuring up equally with, which is what Scott means even if his original report misspelled it.