



City of Seattle

**Testimony of Seattle Department of Transportation Director Grace
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**Before the House Appropriations Subcommittee On Transportation,
Housing And Urban Development, and Related Agencies**

March 19, 2009 Hearing

**Livable Communities, Transit Oriented Development, and
Incorporating Green Building Practices into Federal Housing and
Transportation Policy**

Chairman Olver, Ranking Member Latham, and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify today about “Livable Communities, Transit Oriented Development, and Incorporating Green Building Practices into Federal Housing and Transportation Policy”

I want to praise the committee for recognizing the need for better coordination of transportation and housing programs. For too long, federal government agencies have worked in silos, resulting in inefficiencies in federal funding practices and frustration at the local level in trying to garner support for integrated projects that do not fit neatly into a single grant program. In Seattle and across the nation, cities are undertaking ambitious projects that integrate transportation and housing to create vibrant, mixed-use, mixed-income, communities at new transit stations. These communities are the key to our region's long term sustainability -- economically, socially and environmentally.

In Seattle, the foundation for an integrated land use and transportation policy has been in place for some time and is clearly articulated in the Seattle Comprehensive Plan:

“Part of Seattle's growth strategy is to encourage people to use cars less than they do today. One way to do that is through the urban village strategy's goal of concentrating most new housing, jobs and services near one another in small areas, so that more trips can be made by walking, biking or transit.” (Seattle Comprehensive Plan, 2006)

Seattle is a built-out city and the opportunities for changing urban form are through

redeveloping and retrofitting our existing land use and transportation patterns. The principles that guide our work in reshaping the city are:

- Preserving existing and creating new affordable housing
- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions
- Building complete streets that support walking, biking and transit

Affordable Housing

Consistent with Seattle Mayor Nickels' Race and Social Justice Initiative, we are committed to creating opportunities for people of all income levels to find decent and affordable housing. Seattle is dedicated to achieving that goal by assisting first-time homebuyers; low income, often elderly or disabled homeowners straining to afford necessary life/safety repairs in their homes; low- and moderate-wage workers struggling to find affordable housing in the city where they work; and those with no home at all. Further, our city believes that affordable housing can be environmentally friendly. This is difficult in a city where the average price of a home is just over \$400,000.

Unfortunately, families and individuals looking for affordable housing in Seattle are facing an increasingly tough challenge:

- Local wages are not keeping pace with Seattle's housing prices
- Rents are increasing
- More than 21,000 renters pay more than half their income for rent
- Single family home and condominium prices have stagnated but remain higher than many households can afford
- More than 18,000 homeowner households pay more than half their income for housing costs

Part of Seattle's strategy for increasing housing affordability is to expand housing opportunities adjacent to transit. Purchasing, maintaining and driving a car is much more expensive than using public transportation. According to *Consumer Expenditures in 2006*, released in February of 2008 by the U.S. Department of Labor's U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average vehicle costs \$8,003 per year or \$667 a month to own and operate. This is compared to \$72 for a monthly bus pass. By living in a transit oriented community, a Seattle resident could save \$595 a month toward rent or mortgage expenses. That amount of monthly savings equates to \$90,000 in additional mortgage capacity, which could make the difference between a home that is affordable and one that is out of reach.

Seattle's Rainier Vista and New Holly redevelopments are excellent examples of successful partnerships with the federal government that have resulted in the construction of nearly 2,000 affordable units within walking distance of the new light rail stations in southeast Seattle. These developments are located in the heart of Rainier Valley, one of the most culturally diverse communities in our city. Initial funding for both of these projects came from HOPE VI grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Housing. The \$82 million in HOPE VI funding for these developments leveraged a total investment of

over \$580 million which is being used to replace worn out public housing units built in the 1940's.

Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions

This nation cannot deal with our energy and climate challenges, without confronting the transportation sector. This is particularly true in Seattle, where over 59 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions are attributable to the transportation sector.

Just over four years ago, Seattle Mayor Nickels, along with eight other mayors, initiated the US Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, a pledge to take local action to significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions. To date, more than 900 mayors representing more than 81 million Americans have signed on, joining Mayor Nickels' vision.

To keep Seattle's pledge, Mayor Nickels assembled the Green Ribbon Commission, a group of 18 leaders from Seattle's business, labor, non-profit, government and academic communities. The commission's report suggested actions and changes in policy that would allow the city to meet its obligations regarding the Kyoto Protocol.

The commission's recommendations form the basis of the mayor's Climate Action Plan, a "greenprint" that encompasses principles including increasing densities and investing in transportation options. We are investing heavily in public transit, building more bike paths and making it safer for pedestrians to walk to work, transit, school and parks. By doing this, fewer people will need their cars to get around.

Complete Streets that Support Walking, Biking and Transit

Last year, Mayor Nickels issued a challenge to make Seattle the most walkable and bikeable city in the country. We are making a lot of progress toward that goal with the adoption of our Bicycle Master Plan last year and this year's completion of our Pedestrian Master Plan. Another critical element of achieving this goal is our complete streets policy.

Seattle's complete streets policy dictates that every time we build or reconstruct a road, we expand on its multimodal features unless exceptional circumstances exist. With the political support for Complete Streets in place, the success of Seattle's program rests on consistent policies, practices and reporting tools within the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) to deliver Complete Streets. The practices that have already been put in place that support Complete Streets implementation include:

- Long range facility planning for all modes that include Complete Streets elements citywide. These plans will enable SDOT to focus on streets where modal priorities overlap to come up with creative solutions.
- A system of Street Types that describe desirable street design features consistent with a roadway's classification and adjacent land use.

- A consistent internal review of all roadway projects with the goal of adding bicycle-supportive lane widths and markings.
- A Complete Streets checklist for project managers, designers and planners to document how each project SDOT plans, designs and builds is consistent with our Complete Streets policy.
- A regular update cycle for design standards so that our design practices remain nimble and responsive.
- Performance measures for transit speed and reliability, as well as implementation of a bicycle and pedestrian system to better understand how we are meeting our multi-modal network goals, and communicate our progress to the public.
- Dedicated funding for sidewalk construction that will start to address gaps in the pedestrian network.

Even though Seattle has taken great strides in establishing the policy direction and action steps needed to implement Complete Streets, we are just getting started. Changing the culture of transportation professionals and policy makers does not happen overnight, and there are still many voices in the community who are strong advocates for giving cars priority. With a Complete Streets policy firmly in place, we will be able to balance the needs of all users of the street and offer options for getting around the city, without cars, and get the added benefits of keeping Seattleites active, getting us in touch with our neighborhoods and our neighbors, and building a 21st Century transportation system.

South Lake Union Streetcar

Seattle's South Lake Union action agenda is the perfect land use scenario to support complete streets and transit oriented development. In South Lake Union, we are building a community where people can live, work, and access basic services in a center that supports transit, walking and bicycling.

South Lake Union neighborhood, Seattle's fastest growing neighborhood, is a global health and high-tech center. In 2000, an estimated 22,952 people were employed in the area, representing 4.3 percent of total Seattle employment. South Lake Union is expected to grow by 20,000 new jobs and 9,000 new households by 2024. The area is becoming a major location for biotechnology and biomedical research. Both the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and Zymogenetics have recently expanded their facilities. New organizations and companies attracted to the area include the University of Washington Medical Center, Croixa, Rosetta/Merck and the Seattle Biomedical Research Institute.

To serve this high growth, high tech center, Seattle built a new streetcar line that runs from downtown to the heart of South Lake Union. In one year of operation, the South Lake Union line has served over 500,000 riders, far exceeding original estimates. The streetcar line was built at a cost of \$52 million, partially funded through a \$3 million transfer of funds from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Surface Transportation Program (STP). This allowed us to avoid the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) New Starts process, which would have added several years of

delay to the project. The streetcar line was agreed to, planned, and constructed within four years. Senator Murray was an early champion of this project and helped provide the critical FHWA funding.

In the South Lake Union, we are also seeing the development of affordable housing close to the streetcar line. Downtown Emergency Services Center, an award-winning social services agency in Seattle, is constructing Cascade Supportive Housing, which will provide much-needed housing for 83 chronically homeless, single men and women who are high utilizers of publicly-funded crisis services. Twenty-five of the units will be specifically designated for homeless veterans. This facility is located three blocks from the streetcar line. The residents of this building will be able to use public transportation in to downtown Seattle where they will be able to access additional services within the community. This project is received a HUD Economic Development Initiative grant in the FY 2009 omnibus appropriations bill, thanks to the support of Senator Murray.

The success of the South Lake Union Streetcar has led us to expand the streetcar network to create connections with the light rail stations and significant destinations along the waterfront, at the Seattle Center, and in employment centers on First Hill, a neighborhood just east of downtown Seattle. The First Hill streetcar line is in the design phase. The completion of the streetcar station at the foot of First Hill will dovetail with the redevelopment of Yesler Terrace, one of the first racially integrated housing project in the nation and currently houses about 1,200 residents in 561 apartments. The aging buildings of Yesler Terrace have reached the end of their useful life. With its planned redevelopment, Yesler Terrace will be a great place to live and work with immediate access to transit connections to adjacent neighborhoods and downtown Seattle. Due to limited funds in the HOPE VI program, the Seattle Housing Authority plans to self-finance the redevelopment of Yesler Terrace. If additional funds were provided to HOPE VI, they would certainly apply for them.

Partnership with U.S. DOT

As you know, federal transportation policy must reflect the obvious climate, health, and community benefits of linking mass transit and regional development. Mayor Nickels likes to say that we need to encourage density, so the biggest commute decision in the morning is which pair of shoes to wear on the walk to work. Past federal housing and transportation policies transformed American cities, and not always for the better. We need to break the outdated pattern of highway and sprawl and respond to the needs of the 120 million new Americans expected to live here by 2050.

A wide range of USDOT regulations for both FHWA and FTA and also for Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO) frustrate the ability of local governments to implement environmentally sustainable projects. The FTA in particular now has an opportunity to make great strides in supporting transit, rather than thwarting solid transit projects. For example, in rating projects for cost-effectiveness, FTA rules should recognize that the initial costs of environmentally sustainable projects may be higher cost at the beginning, but produce better long term benefits.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you about transit oriented development. I look forward to working with you during the upcoming authorization to increase funding commitments to public transit.