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Bike-friendly viaduct route?

Before construction congestion begins at the south end of the Alaskan Way Viaduct, the bike route from West Seattle to downtown Seattle needs fixing if the city expects some drivers to shift to bicycles.

By [Mike Lindblom](#)

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Whenever major construction begins to replace the Alaskan Way Viaduct, congestion will make some drivers wonder if they would be better off riding a bike.

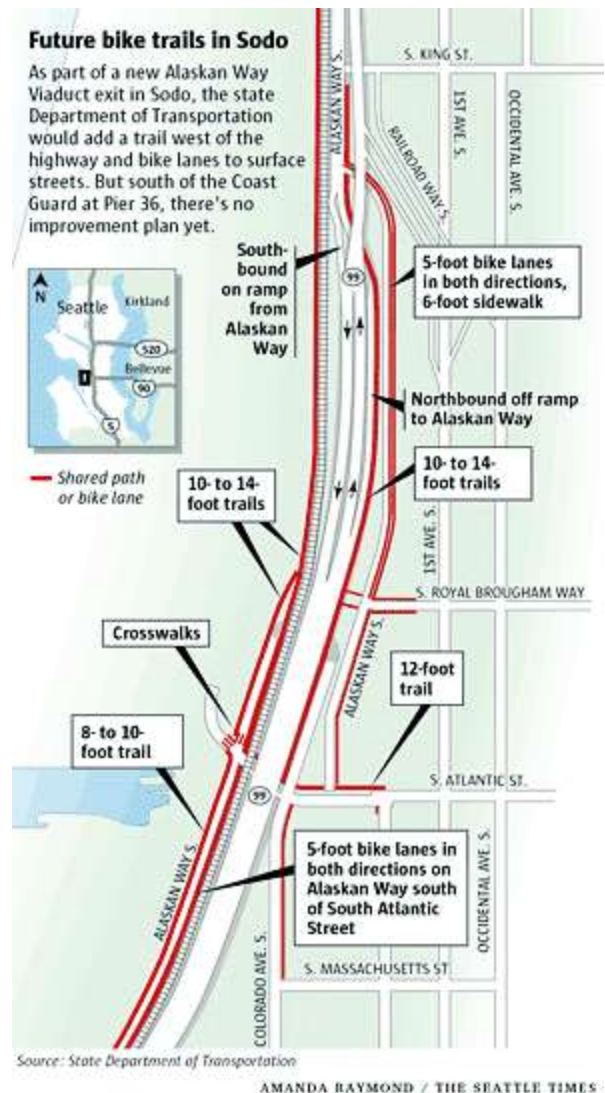
The problem is, the bike route from the south is in bad shape.

And government traffic planners don't have a strategy yet for how to make cycling safer and easier in the corridor, which runs from the West Seattle Bridge to Pioneer Square, while the project is under way.

"This is some of the worst pavement I've ever seen in Seattle," said Ryan Dean, vice chair of the city's Bicycle Advisory Board, which will press for improvements next spring.

Construction on the first viaduct segment — a Sodo interchange near Safeco Field — is a year off, leaving enough time for Seattle and the state Department of Transportation (DOT) to back up their green rhetoric with bike improvements.

Another consolation is that when the interchange is done, in 2012, pedestrians and cyclists will enjoy trails up to 14 feet wide near the sports stadiums.



During construction, the agencies will improvise.

- The state, which controls the project north of the Coast Guard installation at Pier 36, will lay blacktop for temporary trails to get cyclists around blockages, said Ron Paananen, DOT deputy administrator for urban corridors. These would resemble a temporary blacktop trail that the DOT built this past spring, by paving over unused streetcar tracks, while two sinking viaduct columns were being strengthened near Yesler Way.
- The city hasn't yet proposed bike upgrades in its segment, from the Coast Guard docks south to the West Seattle Bridge trail.

"We'll look at that and make sure that route is safe," promises Bob Powers, Seattle's deputy transportation director. City officials will work with the Cascade Bicycle Club to design detours.

Bumps in 2009

A bike lane exists most of the way northbound, but the southbound route combines sidewalks with stretches of spine-rattling pavement for bicyclists on East Marginal Way South. In spots, standing water, a faded bike-lane stripe and train tracks pose tests of skill.

"Marginal's margin is marginal," says an old report by the city bike board.

Dean says regular cyclists have become so adept at swerving past the obstacles that they don't realize how severe the problems are. A novice would have trouble, he said.

By improving the route, the city would help more people ride, taking some cars off the road, said David Hiller, advocacy director for the bike club.

A greater threat is the tango between freight trucks and northbound cyclists entering from the West Seattle Bridge trail. Riders must cross East Marginal Way South to reach the bike lane to downtown. Truckers tend to show courtesy, but sightlines are poor enough that cyclists shun two traffic signals, instead choosing to cross wherever the coast is clear.

Frequent commuter Louise McGrody says she crosses East Marginal diagonally 85 percent of the time.

"Most people turn the corner, then it becomes a free-for-all, as far as people who pick their places and go," said McGrody, special-projects manager for the Bicycle Alliance of Washington. She was hit in January by a pickup that was being towed but broke loose as she waited at a stoplight in the bike lane.

Seattle should look at whether the northbound lane can be "grade-separated," perhaps with Jersey barriers, said Dean.

September spot-checks by the city showed 280 morning commuters biked on or near East Marginal Way South in 2007. On National Bike-to-Work Day, held each May, 545 morning cyclists were counted last year.

Hiller guesses 100 more daily riders will cycle the route within two years. Several others bring their bikes aboard the Elliott Bay Water Taxi.

Bicyclists will meet hundreds more trucks a day because a container port will soon replace the existing cruise-ship dock at Terminal 30, said Dean.

Trails in 2012

Eventually, plans show, the new Sodo interchange in 2012 will include a separate trail, lined with trees and grass, between the highway and the waterfront, with trail bridges over truck lanes.

"The city has done a really good job of holding WashDOT to its commitment on that," Hiller said.

In some spots there will be trails on both sides of the highway, said DOT project manager John White. The exact layout, as well as the layout of temporary bikeway detours, will hinge on whether state lawmakers agree on a design by 2009 for the adjacent segment of the viaduct at the central waterfront, said White.

The Legislature and Gov. Christine Gregoire, in consultation with Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels and King County Executive Ron Sims, are supposed to decide soon whether to build a tunnel, an aerial roadway or surface streets between downtown and Elliott Bay to replace the 55-year-old viaduct segment there.

Regardless of how that debate goes, the Sodo interchange — with bikeways — already has money for construction. "Clearly, the opportunity is there to provide great bike paths along the waterfront," White said.

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