

January 6, 2022

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The Levy Oversight Committee is an advisory body that monitors revenues, expenditures, and program and project implementation. The Oversight Committee advises the City Council, the Mayor, and SDOT on responding to program and project cost savings or overruns. The Oversight Committee reviews SDOT's program and project priorities and financial plans and makes recommendations to the Mayor and City Council regarding the spending of levy proceeds.

Council Bill 118402

Mayor Harrell,

As you know, the Levy to Move Seattle is a nine-year \$930 million levy that provides roughly 30% of SDOT's budget. It expires at the end of 2024.

The Levy Oversight Committee (LOC) is an advisory board composed of members of the Seattle community representing diverse interests and charged with providing oversight of the levy and advice to you, the Council, and the Seattle Department of Transportation regarding the levy. As you start your work as mayor, we would like to provide you with background on our thoughts about levy implementation and recommendations for a possible future levy.

Levy promises

One of the roles of the LOC is to ensure that the levy is implemented in line with what Seattle voters approved. The ballot measure which voters approved indicated that it would fund "bridge seismic upgrades, transit corridor and light rail access projects, pedestrian and bicycle safety projects, synchronize traffic signals, street maintenance and repair, freight projects, and neighborhood street projects." The good news is that about 77% of levy programs are on track to meet or exceed these goals. However, due to a variety of reasons, including the pandemic-related economic downturn and costs exceeding original estimates, some levy programs are not expected to meet promises made to voters.

The levy ordinance includes an emphasis on creating a walkable, transit-rich city; promoting a transportation system that helps fight climate change, nurtures vibrant economy and communities, and improves public health; providing safe infrastructure for children and all pedestrians; maintaining streets that can carry an increasing number of people and goods; and integrating and prioritizing the implementation of modal plans. These values helped inform the following comments.

Levy changes since 2015

Over the life of the levy, the LOC has provided guidance regarding proposed SDOT changes to levy-defined deliverables and finances. Some changes included project pauses and cuts due to city revenue shortfalls impacting SDOT general funds and reductions in federal transportation dollars, both of which are needed to fully pay for many levy projects.

During your term as mayor, the LOC is tasked with providing the city with a recommendation about a continuing levy. It is particularly important to us to show that the levy has successfully delivered on the majority of its promises.

Levy successes

Levy funds enabled SDOT to complete some important projects over the last few years including:

1. Lander Street Overpass
2. Fairview Bridge
3. Northgate light rail station pedestrian improvements including the John Lewis Memorial Bridge
4. Green Lake protected bike lanes
5. More than 2,000 trees planted

Levy gaps

The following levy programs are at risk for not meeting goals set in the 2015 ordinance:

1. Bicycle Safety
2. Sidewalk Safety Repair
3. Arterial Roadway Maintenance
4. Paving Spot Improvements
5. Bridge Seismic Improvements
6. Multimodal Improvements
7. Light Rail Connections
8. New Sidewalks

In the fall, SDOT presented us with a plan for filling the project shortfalls over the next three years and, if completed, it will not only improve our transportation infrastructure, but it could improve voter confidence that the levy is worth continued funding. We encourage the city to continue to look for funding for the remaining unfunded original levy projects.

Multimodal improvements falling short

We are particularly concerned about the shortfalls in the Transit Plus Multimodal Improvements Program where it appears that, by the end of the current levy, only two of the seven originally proposed corridors will receive substantial corridor level improvements that will improve transit speed and reliability. For example, the Rapid Ride R line, which is to replace Metro's Route 7 through Rainier Valley, is delayed due to funding gaps. Another example is the Rapid Ride G line (Downtown to Madison Valley) which was initially expected to be complete by 2019. However, the project just broke ground in the fall and won't be completed until 2024.

Vision Zero outcomes falling short, especially in District 2

In 2021, at least 31 people died in traffic-related crashes in Seattle, an increase compared to the last few years. Twenty-two (71%) of them were killed while walking, rolling, or biking. The majority (60%) of traffic-related fatalities were in D2, which you know is home to many communities of color who have historically received less infrastructure investment. One of the levy's goals is to advance Safe Routes, which includes the City's Vision Zero plan. While the Safe Routes program is on target for meeting project and spending goals, the projects mostly do not address the large-scale safety improvements needed on some of our least safe streets including Aurora Ave, Martin Luther King Jr Way, Rainier Ave, and Lake City Way. SDOT knows how to prevent traffic injuries and deaths but, to implement proven strategies, a more significant investment is needed.

Bridge seismic improvements falling short

Due to prohibitive costs, the Bridge Seismic Improvement program will not meet levy goals. Per a December 2020 SDOT memo about program costs, “the deficit between programmed and estimated costs is approximately \$663M. The largest cost increases stem from significant foundation retrofits that were not known to be needed to achieve retrofit performance goals.” To fund the program without levy dollars, the City Council authorized up to \$103 million of limited tax general obligation bonds for transportation infrastructure, intended in part for seismic upgrades to the Ballard Bridge and Fremont Bridge. The city will also need to pursue grant funding to make more seismic improvements.

Focus on equity

In addition to fulfilling the promises made within the Levy’s program areas described above, we have emphasized the importance of equity, safety, climate change, and project viability in our meetings with and feedback to SDOT. Transportation equity is important to oversight committee members. We are pleased to report that SDOT has embraced these areas and is completing more projects in parts of the city that have historically had fewer infrastructure investments.

Budgeting with non-levy funds

Because this levy expires in 2024, it is critical to begin discussing what should be included and how much funding the levy will require. It's also critical that future levy commitments can be accomplished with a high level of certainty. Including other funding, such as sales tax and other revenue sources, to deliver projects can be problematic if those other revenue sources are diverted at some point in the levy lifespan. The LOC looks forward to discussing with your team and SDOT about how to bring more certainty to the overall Levy budget.

Thank you for taking the time to review our comments and consider what needs to be done before we recommend a replacement to the levy in three years. We look forward to working with you to ensure the success of the Levy to Move Seattle.

Sincerely and on behalf of the Move Seattle Levy Oversight Committee,

Inga Manskopf
Co-Chair (2022/2023)

Sam Ferrara
Co-Chair (2021/2022)