

## **Case #15: Vacillating on Public Safety**

Grave safety concerns with the Alaskan Way Viaduct and the SR 520 Bridge in Washington State have been known and debated for the past decade. At the current time (September, 2007), however, no public action is imminent to address the concerns. Government agencies and regulators, the private sector, including building owners, corporations, and merchants, professionals in architecture, construction, engineering and related fields, and individuals such as homeowners, consumers, farmers, residents and tax payers have all played a role in perpetuating the present condition of vulnerability. Although the above players may act with the best intentions, each may have only a limited view of what mitigation should involve.

Independent reviews have concluded that both the Alaskan Way Viaduct and the SR 520 Bridge need to be replaced. In September 2000, Tammy Doherty, Regional Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), stated that “Seismic hazard in the Pacific Northwest has remained constant this last decade, but seismic risk has increased dramatically, due to urban development, aging infrastructure and vulnerable transportation corridors. A FEMA study of earthquake risk across the United States indicates that 84 percent of this nation’s annual losses are expected to occur in California, Oregon and Washington State.”

More recently, based on an independent study, the Alaskan Way Viaduct was found to have one of the lowest ratings possible for structural sufficiency. State bridges are given a structural sufficiency rating to prioritize them for rehabilitation and replacement. This rating is a number between 0 and 100 that reflects the physical condition of the bridge, load ratings and importance of the bridge. A new bridge receives a rating of 100. When a bridge is rated at 80, it becomes eligible for rehabilitation funding. A rating of 50 warrants the bridge’s replacement with a new structure. The Viaduct currently has a structural sufficiency rating of 9.

In 2006, an expert review panel of the Alaskan Way Viaduct and SR 520 structures concluded “The Washington State Legislature, the Puget Sound region, and the people of Washington State have explored – diligently and faithfully – the various possibilities for these much needed projects. The public thoughtfulness that has characterized them for the past several years is admirable. But additional deliberation of the merits of various options would be counterproductive. If the decision making process is extended much further, inflation will diminish the purchasing power of the funds that have already been committed. Meanwhile, the existing viaduct and bridge will continue to deteriorate and inch closer to catastrophic failure. The time has come to move forward with these vital public works projects.”

This same expert review panel commented “we are concerned about the political fragmentation that seems to characterize these projects today. It is not evident that either political will or public support has coalesced around these projects. We see strongly held opinions and positions by political leaders and stakeholders, but no process for reaching a conclusion. We see a great need for strong political leadership now, to move these vital

public-works projects forward. The biggest risk these projects face is that of indecision and vacillation by political and civic leaders. The safe, speedy rebuilding of these roadways and infrastructure is critical, both to the Puget Sound Region and the entire statewide transportation system – not only to review congested highways, but also to prevent catastrophic damage in the event of an earthquake or major storm.”

In 2007, voters of Washington State voted against each of two separate (and conflicting), one of which called for replacing the Viaduct with a similar above ground structure, and the other of which would have involved building a tunnel to replace the currently existing viaduct structure. After the failure of both initiatives, the Governor of Washington has commissioned another study consider alternatives for the replacement of the Viaduct and SR 520 Bridge.