



Repurposing the Right-of-Way: Mobility Options and People-Oriented Streets in an Equitable City

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The Seattle Planning Commission advises City of Seattle elected officials and staff on policies and programs related to land use, housing, transportation and related issues. As stewards of the Comprehensive Plan, the Commission actively engages in the annual review of amendments to the Plan and a robust and iterative review of the major updates to the Plan that occur every seven or so years.

In 2021, the Commission offered [recommended overarching themes to guide the next major update](#). As a follow up to those recommendations, we are preparing a series of issue-specific briefs. The following brief is the third in the series and focuses on how the City's public rights-of-way can be repurposed and re-envisioned in the Comprehensive Plan major update.

Introduction

For nearly 100 years, planning and design in Seattle have proceeded from the assumption that the primary function of the City's public rights-of-way is the movement and storage of privately-owned vehicles. But over the 20-year horizon of the next Comprehensive Plan, several exigencies will require that default assumption to be set aside.

Purely as a function of space, the City cannot accommodate expected growth in population and remain livable if the movement and storage of private motor vehicles remain the overwhelming focus on our street rights-of-way; there simply isn't room. At the same time, perpetuation of the status quo will literally kill us. Rather than declining to zero as the City has pledged, deaths and injuries on our roadways are on the rise, with seniors and children especially at risk. The City of Seattle can neither meet its pledge to mitigate climate change nor adapt to its impacts by maintaining current conditions. And, as demonstrated during the pandemic, our streets often provide the only available open space in dense urban villages, and the demands for public space will only grow as our population does.

Roadway violence, adverse climate change impacts, and lack of access to open spaces also disproportionately affect our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. While a shift in the primary function of the City's rights-of-way is essential for the reasons noted above, this transition must avoid inadvertently harming vulnerable communities and especially those who have been displaced to less well-connected areas.

Re-envisioning the public right-of-way as limited and increasingly valuable public space - and reprioritizing its use in response - will open myriad possibilities for improving city life while meeting important policy goals. The major update of the Comprehensive Plan must reflect that new vision.

What is the public right-of-way?

The public right-of-way is land intended for transportation, utilities, and other public uses including streets, alleys, medians, sidewalks, stairways, and landscaped areas. This valuable public space makes up approximately 27 percent of Seattle's land¹, with the majority developed as roadways supporting transportation (largely cars and trucks) and some unimproved with paving and acting as open space.²

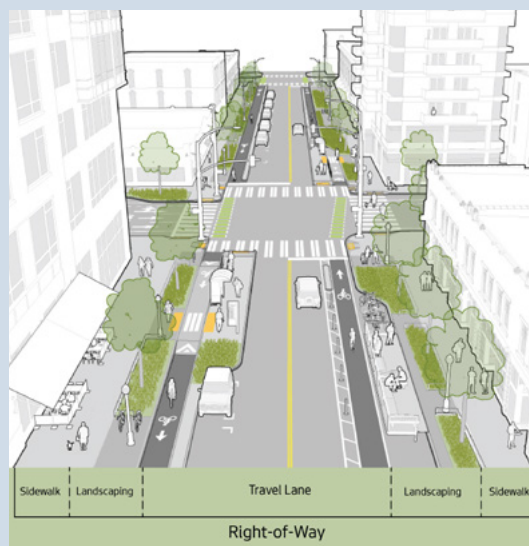


Figure 1: A representation of the Right-of-Way. Adapted from SDOT Streets Illustrated.

1 "Growing Seattle Ups the Ante on Green and Complete Streets." Sightline Institute, Aug 10, 2018. <https://www.sightline.org/2018/08/10/seattle-green-and-complete-streets>

2 <https://streetsillustrated.seattle.gov/urban-design/public-space/unimproved-right-of-way/>.

A vision

Publicly owned right-of-way provides not just mobility, but also critical social and cultural space, an environmental and recreational resource, and an opportunity for economic development. It links all of us together, whether we are using it to get to our local grocery store or community center, stopping and chatting with our neighbors, or getting outside to enjoy nature and play.

The Seattle Planning Commission envisions a future where Seattleites of all ages, races, income levels, and abilities safely use and enjoy our public rights-of-way. Transformed by direct community involvement, this public space provides safe and equitable access by bicycle, wheelchair, foot, transit, or by car. It forms an interconnected network that maintains opportunities for people displaced to the outermost parts of the city to quickly reach vibrant community centers and jobs in city center neighborhoods. In this future, Seattleites and visitors enjoy a network of urban nature corridors with street trees connecting to habitat patches in parks and clean stormwater flowing to our waterways.



Figure 2: Children biking along a multi-use path. Photo Credit: SDOT.

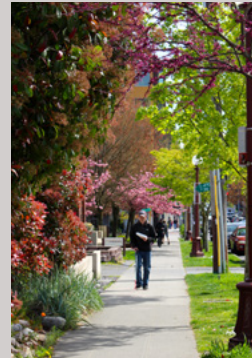


Figure 3: A pedestrian on a tree-lined sidewalk in Columbia City. Photo credit: SDOT.



Figure 4: Three people playing chess in a parklet downtown. Photo credit: SDOT

A function of space

Seattle currently has about 610 cars for every 1,000 people - more per capita even than Los Angeles (583 per 1,000) and substantially more than comparable cities such as San Francisco, Boston, and Washington, D.C.³ Making space for these cars requires the vast majority of the right-of-way be dedicated to travel lanes and parking. This has enormous fiscal implications. The City of Seattle estimates about 500,000 parking spaces are within the public right-of-way. Of those, only 12,000 are metered; the rest are publicly subsidized and "free of charge" to users, representing lost actual and opportunity costs to the City in terms of uncollected revenue, unrealized transportation options, environmental impact, maintenance, and more. Land use policies such as minimum parking requirements and "free" on-street parking have prioritized the movement and storage of cars on our increasingly valuable public rights-of-way.

3 "Seattle has finally reached peak car, and only one other densely populated U.S. city has more cars per capita." Seattle Times, February 18, 2021. <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/data/seattles-car-population-has-finally-peaked/>

Removing the threat of death and injury

The number, size, weight, and speed of cars, SUVs, and pick-ups in the city are key factors in the rising deaths and injuries on our streets, especially on the arterial roads where we have concentrated new housing through our growth strategy and previous Comprehensive Plans. This is true despite the City's 2015 adoption of a "Vision Zero" goal to eliminate deaths and serious injuries in our rights-of-way by 2030. We are on an opposite trajectory. Fatalities among people walking, rolling, or biking on Seattle streets were 150 percent higher five years after declaring that goal than five years before⁴. Transitioning to electric vehicles is unlikely to help. Batteries make them even heavier than conventional vehicles, and their quiet operation – while an overall bonus – is a risk to pedestrians. A true devotion to Vision Zero requires redesigning roads and reallocating space to reduce traffic speeds and create safe spaces for people walking, biking, and using wheelchairs and other mobility devices.⁵



Figure 5: A family crosses a busy intersection along Rainier Ave S. Photo credit: SDOT.

Fulfilling our climate pledges

For many years, Seattle has proclaimed leadership in responding to climate change, with declared intentions to reduce climate-harming emissions and to adapt to rising heat, increased rainfall, and intensifying storms. Climate is a useful framework to see how the City's plans and initiatives interact with each other and relate to allocation of our rights-of-way. Vehicle emissions account for the lion's share of greenhouse gases in Seattle. Keeping a lid on vehicle miles traveled is critical to reducing those emissions. Electrification of private vehicles is a worthy pursuit, but the City has little control over the rate at which the privately-owned fleet changes over. Hoped-for future electrification is no substitute for curbing emissions from the predominant source in the near term. Electrification also addresses only one component of a vehicle's total carbon footprint – tailpipe emissions – without reducing the embodied carbon in the vehicle itself and in the infrastructure required to move and store it.

Taking climate action requires allocating more space to providing safe and convenient alternatives to driving everywhere for everything. On the adaptation side, taking the edge off the intensifying urban heat island calls for increased tree canopy and vegetation and less pavement overall. The city also will

4 "Pedestrian deaths climb in Seattle, despite City's pledge to eliminate them." KUOW, January 24, 2022. <https://www.kuow.org/stories/pedestrian-deaths-climb-in-seattle-despite-city-s-pledge-to-eliminate-them>

5 "Study: What are the best street safety improvements?" Governing, September 16, 2022. <https://www.governing.com/community/what-are-the-best-safe-streets-improvements>

need more "green stormwater infrastructure" to capture, slow, and filter runoff from more frequent and intense storms in order to prevent flooding and protect salmon and other aquatic life. Again, this signals an urgent need to elevate other priorities above rapid movement and storage of private vehicles in our right-of-way.



Figure 6: A stormwater project runs along Vine Street downtown. Photo credit: SDOT.

Increasing mobility options and open space

Street design should involve a more complex set of considerations than vehicle movement and storage that accounts for the effects on the public realm and the surrounding context. A growing, denser Seattle will need many more "complete" and "green" streets that welcome safe, non-auto activity. This will require more widespread traffic calming; safer and better-connected travel ways for bicycles and other mobility devices; wider sidewalks and well-marked, comfortably spaced crossings; trees and landscaping; the potential for cafés, market spaces, and recreation; and green stormwater infrastructure. These improvements can increase the access, reliability, and safety of options such as transit, bicycles, and scooters, but cannot be achieved while continuing to privilege the private car by default. Seattleites got a glimpse of some of the possibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic as communities thought more expansively about use of the right-of-way and created Stay Healthy Streets and Café Streets.



Figure 7: People enjoy a sidewalk cafe on a tree-lined street in Madison Park. Photo credit: SDOT.



Figure 8: Right-of-way improvements added greenspace and pathways along 14th Ave NW. Photo credit: SDOT.

Well-designed sidewalks and clearly marked crossings, coupled with slower vehicle speeds, are vital for safety, quality of life, and mobility for all residents, but are especially so for children, people with disabilities, and seniors. In perpetuation of a glaring inequity, neighborhoods in North Seattle and South Seattle – many with concentrations of low-income families and communities of color – still lack basic sidewalks and adequate stormwater drainage (to say nothing of the associated aesthetic improvements seen in more affluent areas). Correcting that inequity should be an urgent focus over the life of the next Comprehensive Plan. This inequitable infrastructure deficit is a feature not only of budgetary policies, but also policy priorities, as the City chooses mostly to rely on developers constructing new or remodeled buildings to provide right-of-way improvements.

Equitable streets for people in a growing City

While the Planning Commission envisions a transition away from automobile dependency and associated cost burdens, research has demonstrated the vital role cars currently play for many in low-income communities lacking reliable public transportation⁶. This is especially true for low-income households, BIPOC women workers, and communities of color that have been displaced to locations farther from the city core that lack reliable public transportation to jobs, schools, and cultural resources. We recognize the need to own, insure, and maintain a car is an economic hardship, particularly for low-income households. Reducing the need for car ownership is an important objective with the potential for significant environmental and social equity benefits⁷. However, we also recognize that such a transition must avoid inadvertently harming vulnerable communities. Reducing the overall need for car ownership in all communities likely will not occur without strong anti-displacement strategies, access to affordable housing, and equitable transit-oriented development.

We also recognize that some areas of the city were designed to be car-dependent, with low densities and essential services beyond walking distance from homes, and that their evolution toward walkability may take the life of the next Comprehensive Plan to accomplish. However, in our long-range planning we must be clear that reliance on privately-owned vehicles presents significant issues affecting safety and health, affordability, air and water pollution, climate, tree canopy, recreation, noise, gender equity, and more. While change will not be instantaneous – and we must take care to ensure it prioritizes the needs of our least-advantaged neighbors – this is a status quo that we need not, and must not, perpetuate.

Fulfilling longstanding policy goals

Making a conscious choice to reprioritize the use of this limited and increasingly valuable space opens myriad possibilities for improving other aspects of city life and meeting important policy goals. In previous iterations of the Comprehensive Plan and in multiple other plans, we have set ambitious goals for the City to evolve to be more equitable and affordable; to eliminate traffic violence; to lead on

6 *Changing Lanes: A Gender Equity Transportation Study*, Los Angeles Department of Transportation. <https://ladot.lacity.org/changinglanes>

7 "Automobile Dependency: An Unequal Burden." Planetizen, December 15, 2020. <https://www.planetizen.com/blogs/111535-automobile-dependency-unequal-burden>

climate; to be the "most walkable city" in the nation; to continue strong growth in transit ridership; to provide more open space; to preserve and grow the street canopy; to protect salmon and orcas from roadway pollution; and more. However, each of those goals have been undermined by the underlying default toward centering the rapid throughput and storage of cars on our rights-of-way.



Figure 9: A narrow sidewalk runs along high-traffic and high-speed Aurora Ave. Photo credit: SDOT.

Several existing City plans and programs point to the opportunity to repurpose the right-of-way and support a transition to an equitable transportation system and public space network, and underscore the need for the policy changes the Commission is suggesting. These include:

- [Streets Illustrated: The Seattle Right-of-Way Improvements Manual](#)
- [City Life at Street Level](#)
- [Transportation Modal Plans](#)
 - [Bicycle Master Plan](#)
 - [Freight Master Plan](#)
 - [Pedestrian Master Plan](#)
 - [Transit Master Plan](#)
- [Seattle Climate Action Plan](#)
- [Seattle Department of Transportation Public Space Management Programs](#)
- [Stay Healthy Streets](#)
- [Transportation Electrification Blueprint](#)
- [Shape Our Water, Seattle Public Utilities Citywide drainage and wastewater planning](#)
- [Imagine Greater Downtown](#)
- [Outside Citywide](#)
- Various community-level plans, such as [Capitol Hill: Public Spaces + Public Life](#)

Opportunities to evolve the Comprehensive Plan

The Planning Commission is strongly committed to the principles of racial equity in the development of a multimodal transportation system and public space network that is designed for the most vulnerable populations. The updated Comprehensive Plan and the forthcoming Seattle Transportation Plan must focus on equity to prioritize transportation and safety investments in communities of color. It is important that these communities be part of the transportation planning process from the outset since both plans aspire to make the city more equitable, livable, sustainable, and resilient for today's communities and future residents. The Commission urges that the next Comprehensive Plan build from the values and strategies expressed in the Seattle Department of Transportation's [Transportation Equity Framework](#) developed by the Transportation Equity Workgroup, as well as the recent [Public Space Management Program](#). They form an excellent basis for prioritizing investment in communities that have been marginalized by Seattle's transportation infrastructure.

The urban village strategy and previous Comprehensive Plans have concentrated growth along arterials that often are busy, dangerous sources of health-harming emissions in neighborhoods with limited public space. Over the life of the next Plan, the City must prioritize investment in these corridors to prevent traffic violence while providing more opportunities for outdoor activity; improve transit speed and reliability; reduce noise and emissions in residential areas; and increase options for non-motorized travel.

In its Transportation element, the Seattle 2035 Comprehensive Plan recognizes the need for a transition away from over-reliance on the automobile:

"Transit, bicycling, walking, and shared transportation services reduce collisions, stress, noise, and air pollution, while increasing social contact, economic vitality, affordability, and overall health. Transportation policies that encourage use of non-automobile travel options support not only the City's growth strategy but also its environmental goals, including those related to climate change. By reducing the need for personal car use, the City can also reduce congestion and provide more opportunities to reallocate public right-of-way for trees and landscaping. Providing and promoting a wider variety of transportation options is also integral to achieving these environmental goals."

The current Plan's Built Environment element includes a goal to "design streets with distinctive identities" using "different design treatments to reflect a particular street's function, right-of-way width, and adjoining uses." The next Comprehensive Plan should go a step further to explicitly recognize and call for streets that are designed to de-emphasize rapid vehicle travel and are compatible with community goals, anti-displacement policies, and connectivity with the broader transportation network.

Other worthy policies in the existing Transportation element include:

- Devote space in the street right-of-way to accommodate multiple functions of mobility, access for commerce and people, activation, landscaping, and storage of vehicles.
- Consider safety concerns, modal master plans, and adjacent land uses when prioritizing functions in the pedestrian, travel way, and flex zones of the right-of-way.
- Develop a decision-making framework to direct the planning, design, and optimization of street right-of-way.
- Create vibrant public spaces in and near the right-of-way that foster social interaction, promote access to walking, bicycling, and transit options, and enhance the public realm.
- Enhance the public street tree canopy and landscaping in the street right-of-way.
- Build great streetscapes and activate public spaces in the right-of-way to promote economic vitality.
- Minimize right-of-way conflicts to safely accommodate all travelers.

The Commission recommends removing "storage of vehicles" from the first bullet above in favor of a call to develop a citywide parking policy and plan that looks to balance revenue needs with opportunities for multi-function streets that provide more options, public space, and environmental benefits. Overall, the next Transportation element should prioritize allocating space for people-oriented, transit, and freight/commercial uses over privately owned vehicles, while acknowledging the need to maintain or improve connectivity during the transition.



Figure 10: Many residential streets in Seattle have parking for cars on both sides of the street. Photo credit: SDOT.

The Utilities element sets a goal to "coordinate right-of-way activities among departments to meet transmission, distribution, and conveyance goals; to minimize the costs of infrastructure investment and maintenance; to manage stormwater; and to support other uses such as transportation, trees, and public space." The Major Update should strengthen policies that encourage interdepartmental collaboration and capital budgeting, in order to promote green stormwater infrastructure and shared use of the public right-of-way to further goals for climate and natural resource protection.

Linking the Seattle Transportation Plan with the Comprehensive Plan

The Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) is developing the Seattle Transportation Plan (STP) with an intention of integrating the City's four modal plans – Pedestrian, Bicycle, Freight, and Transit – with the underlying, but unstated, "car plan". SDOT has said the integrated plan will work to ensure space for all modes while seeking to achieve Vision Zero, address public space functions, adapt to new mobility devices, prepare for automated vehicles, and lay the groundwork for the electrification of vehicles. The STP is being undertaken ahead of a need to develop a package of capital projects as a successor to the current Levy to Move Seattle, which expires in 2024. The Commission strongly urges SDOT and the planning team to coordinate closely with the Comprehensive Plan Major Update to ensure that the resulting plan and package mesh with and undergird the future growth strategy and supporting land use policies and development patterns.

The Planning Commission endorses previous City proposals to employ the "15-minute neighborhood" as a conceptual framework for Seattle's next growth strategy. As our population grows, people will need even greater access to more complete neighborhoods where daily needs and activities are within a short walk, bike ride, or transit trip. The strategies to get there include introducing more housing and neighborhood-oriented commercial uses in areas that are currently auto-dependent, allowing more people to live closer to parks and schools, while upgrading the walking, biking, and transit connections among homes and daily needs in our neighborhoods. Proximity, along with safe walking and biking routes, can eliminate the need for car trips. That proximity – replacing long trips for daily needs with short trips – in turn creates a virtuous cycle that removes the need for car trips and allows more of the right-of-way to be repurposed for public space, safe biking and transit access, and safe, convenient, quieter, and more pleasant walking routes. The Seattle Transportation Plan and resulting multi-year package of capital projects will be critical to successfully realize this strategy.



Figure 11: In Belltown, pedestrian infrastructure and access to shops and transit make it possible to run errands without a car. Photo credit: SDOT.

A journey toward balance and equity

The Planning Commission recognizes that the evolution toward a more balanced transportation network and greener, more broadly accessible public space will be long and laden with trade-offs. We recognize that certain road types – such as those critical for freight mobility – might not change according to this framework. In addition, various corridors could see priorities shift over several miles. Some segments might favor car movement, while most other stretches would see much slower vehicle speeds. Some could evolve to become entirely car-free zones. Regardless of function, as many streets as possible would see more trees, vegetation, and other green infrastructure to reduce and treat stormwater. Many of these changes will come slowly, if at all, unless the City facilitates and streamlines the budgetary and coordination issues across SDOT, Seattle Public Utilities, Parks and Recreation, and other departments.

The journey toward more equitable, less deadly, and more climate-proof allocation and design of our rights-of-way starts with a clear-eyed policy declaration in the Comprehensive Plan that the longstanding – if undeclared – primacy of private motor vehicle throughput and storage must be set aside. As we have noted, this neither anticipates nor calls for elimination of privately-owned vehicles. It merely acknowledges and seeks to adapt to the accumulating circumstances – rising traffic violence, congestion, climate impacts, and a crying need for travel options and public space – that require us to be more flexible and creative in our use of space than we have allowed ourselves to be in the past.

The Seattle Planning Commission acknowledges that change will not be instantaneous – nor should it be – and that there are many difficult policy and budgetary choices to be made to ensure a just transition. However, we are confident that Seattle has the civic wherewithal to make the shift over the 20-year life of the next Comprehensive Plan.