David Roberts

Energy, politics, and more

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Seattle's impending car-centric mega-tunnel: a chat with urbanist Cary Moon

By David Roberts

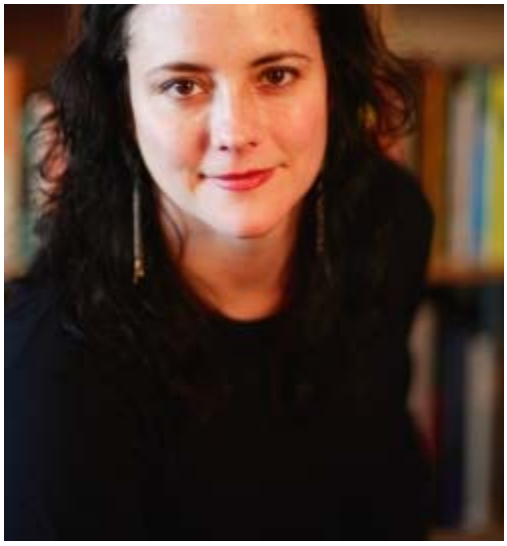
In the Pacific Northwest, where well over half the electric power comes from low-carbon hydro, the climate challenge is primarily about reducing greenhouse gas emissions from transportation. That is to say: it's about *cars*.

Despite their ostentatious talk on climate, many of the region's political leaders don't seem to be making the transportation connection. Nowhere is that more evident than in the fight over how to replace Seattle's crumbling Alaskan Way Viaduct, a two-mile-long elevated stretch of State Route 99 running along the city's waterfront. It offers a gorgeous, iconic view of the city and the waterfront, but the next earthquake may well reduce it to rubble, so there's pressure on to figure out what to replace it with.

Seattle's Alaskan Way ViaductWSDOT

The alternative with the most momentum, backed by Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire (D) and powerful business interests, is a gigantic bored tunnel — a concrete-heavy, emissions-intensive, multi-billion-dollar piece of old-school highway infrastructure devoted almost entirely to cars, shuttling suburban drivers past the urban core. What's worse, it is being rammed through over the express opposition of Seattle voters.

If such a megaproject sounds crazy to you in an era of climate crisis, peak oil, and starved state budgets, you are not alone. A coalition of urbanists and environmentalists is rallying around an alternative: a "surface street option" that would, as with San Francisco's Embarcadero freeway, eliminate the highway, replacing



Cary Moon

it with a waterfront surface road, enhanced transit, and traffic improvements to surrounding streets and nearby Interstate 5.

One of the major forces behind the surface option is a rising star in Seattle progressive politics, Cary Moon, whose People's Waterfront Coalition has done more than any other group to demonstrate that there is a viable alternative to car-centric madness.

I chatted with Moon last week about the history of the tunnel fight and what comes next.

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DR: Can you lay out the basic story of how Seattle got here?

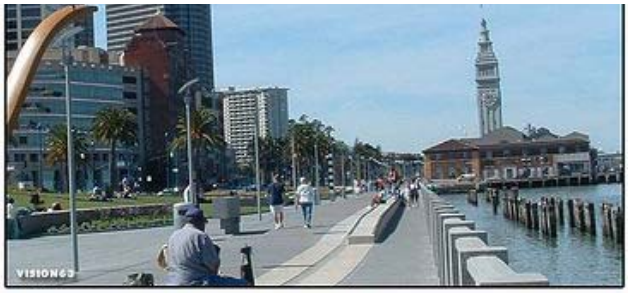
CM: [The Alaskan Way Viaduct] has been in bad shape for a while; the 2001 earthquake forced agencies into action. It got pretty severely damaged and they almost closed it down right then and there. But they decided, no, we've got to figure out how we want to replace it before we close it. So WSDOT [Washington State Department of Transportation] and SDOT [Seattle Department of Transportation] considered alternatives and came up with either a cut-and-cover tunnel or an elevated highway on the waterfront.

The mayor [Greg Nickels] liked the cut-and-cover tunnel, which was part elevated, part surface, and nine blocks of underground tunnel. The governor liked the elevated, because it was cheaper. They couldn't agree, so they decided to toss it to the voters. In 2007, voters in Seattle looked at both options and said no (55 percent) to the elevated and no (70 percent) to the tunnel.

About two years prior to that, [the People's Waterfront Coalition] had formed to say, wait a minute, why are we even assuming it has to be a highway? We did a lot of research on what was going on in other cities and brought all these case studies of giant urban highways that had been torn down – and the traffic impacts were better without the highway than with it. It's counterintuitive, but it works. You're giving people more choice. You're distributing trips instead of channeling them all into one place, which can jam up when there's congestion. It's got environmental benefits, because you're encouraging people to stay local rather than enabling sprawl and long-distance commutes.

DR: What are some of the other cities who have been through this?

CM: The biggest is Seoul, Korea. They took out a highway that had 160,000 cars a day and replaced it with transit and a four-lane street. The Embarcadero in San Francisco: they didn't think they could live without it, but they took



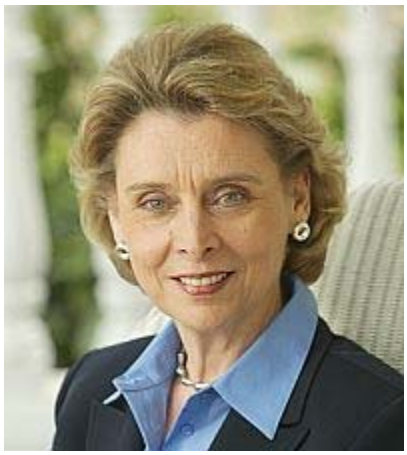
San Francisco's Embarcadero, in 1992 and post-highway in 2003.vision63 via Flickr

it down and now that is one of the best places in San Francisco. Merchants love the local access rather than highway through-put. The West Side Highway in New York: there was a big fight about replacing it to avoid gridlock. The highway fell down and they realized, wait a minute, there's no gridlock, maybe we don't need it. They put in a surface street, maybe not the nicest street in the world, but it shows that a highway can be replaced by a better-connected street and life goes on. Portland took out a waterfront highway and reclaimed their waterfront for people.

DR: So, 2007 was when voters rejected both the tunnel and the elevated highway. Then?

CM: A lot of people at the time said that our side won, because [the surface-street option] was the only option left on the table. But it wasn't that easy.

At that point, the city, county, and state said, OK, we failed the first round, let's start again; let's set up a stakeholder process where we're going to stay in lockstep and come up with a solution together. After a year of study, the two winners were surface/transit/I-5 or a skinnier elevated highway with a lot of transit. A representative sample of the citizen groups involved signed a letter saying, yep, let's do that, and keep the door open to a bored tunnel later if it ends up not providing enough car capacity. We thought we won again!



Christine Gregoire

But then Gregoire checked in with the other people that she works with — Boeing, the regional Chamber of Commerce, other suburban interests — and they said, no way, that's crazy, you have to rebuild that highway; you should just do the bored tunnel. The bored tunnel had been rejected by officials because it was too expensive and risky, but they talked Gregoire into it anyway.

That's where the situation's been the past two years: the official preferred alternative is the bored tunnel and they're pursuing it full-force.

DR: This is the juncture that confuses me. Seattle voters spoke. The city and state departments of transportation spoke. Civic groups spoke. Then the governor single-handedly overrode all that?

CM: Yes.

DR: Wow.

CM: I'm giving you my biased view. There were plenty of stakeholders in the 29 citizen groups who liked the bored tunnel from th
e beginning. But officials were saying, no, you don't understand. That's too expensive. We can't do that. You can't have your cake and eat it too.

The stakeholder process ended in December 2008. On Jan. 13, 2009, Gregoire announced with [former Seattle Mayor Greg] Nickels and [former King County Commissioner Ron] Sims that they're doing the bored

tunnel, along with $190 million worth of transit service (that's how they got Sims to go along with it).

DR: What is the legal force behind the tunnel being decided? Is it official now?

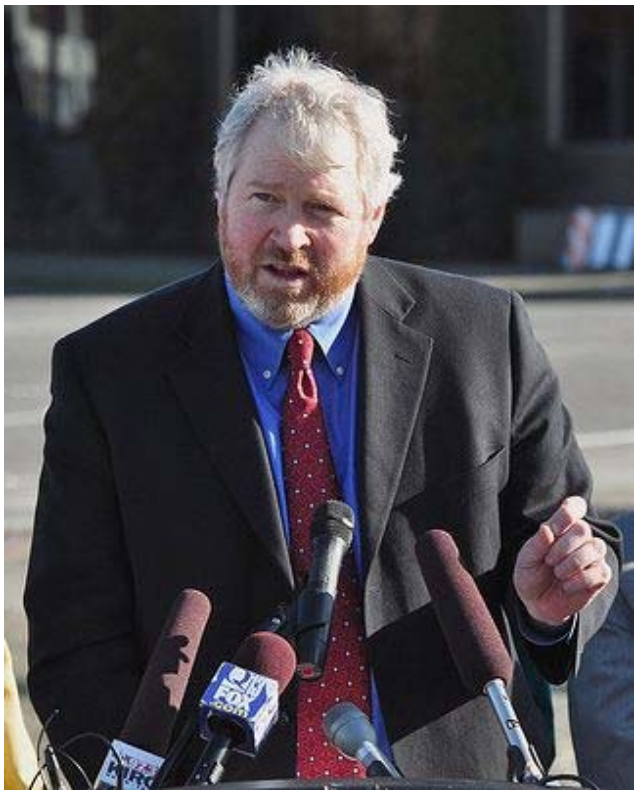
CM: It's still not official — it's a "preferred alternative." It's just that politically it has a lot of momentum. Tunnel supporters want everyone to believe it's past the point of no return. And as you can imagine, after nine years of arguing, people are exhausted and they just want to be done with it.

DR: Has nobody been able to mount serious protest?

CM: Until there was actually a budget, a plan on paper, it was hard to attack the tunnel. Tunnel proponents kept saying, don't worry, the traffic's just going to disappear! It's totally affordable! There's no risk! They spent almost two years in that mode, but the draft EIS [environmental impact statement] came out recently from WSDOT.

Now that the facts are on the table, politicians are forced to confront the reality, not the fantasy. A new citizens' initiative [Move Seattle Smarter] is launching, saying the city can't sign any agreements on the tunnel until there's a full, transparent funding plan and someone steps up to the plate for potential cost overrun.

DR: That's always been Seattle Mayor Mike McGinn's ace in the hole against the tunnel, right? Cost overruns? [McGinn was elected in November 2009 on an anti-tunnel platform.]



Seattle Mayor Mike McGinnWSDOT

CM: Politically, that is what gets people the most irritated, that WSDOT picked this project and then said they're only going to pay a certain amount and the citizens of Seattle will pick up the rest.

The state has agreed to pay $2.4 billion out of an estimated $3.1 billion. They're hoping to get $300 million from the port, but that's not secure yet. They're going to toll the tunnel, so they're going to float bonds for $400 million on future toll revenue. There's $700 million of unsecured money.

Every single agency or government involved has said they are not paying a penny more for cost overruns. Kind of a problem. If the project goes over budget, there's no money for that. Usually that would be fine, except in this case the cost estimate the state is using is their 60th-percentile number, meaning there's a 40 percent chance it's going to cost more.

DR: By the state's reckoning. Is there reason to believe they might be under-counting?

CM: Given that nine out of 10 mega-projects exceed their budgets, tunnels are some of the worst, and this is the largest diameter [single-bore tunnel] ever attempted in the history of the world, yes.

–> PAGE TWO: WHAT THE SURFACE STREET OPTION WOULD LOOK LIKE