



October 15, 2009

AIASWW – URBAN ADVOCACY – TACOMA DOME DISTRICT COMMUTER RAIL EXTENSION

The following is a brief history of AIASWW involvement in the Sounder Commuter, “D” to “M” Street rail extension through the Tacoma Dome District. This summary does not attempt to note all activities that have occurred to date in the project, but instead, provides a general overview of how AIASWW came to be involved in this effort, our initial goals, and our most recent involvement.

In 2006, as part of the AIA National 150 Celebration, AIASWW engaged the citizens of Tacoma in a series of collaborative workshops and forums to explore and evaluate possible alternatives to the initial “D to M Street” rail extension design proposed by Sound Transit. AIA recognized that, while various public meetings had been conducted, there had been limited public consensus-building in how rail would be extended, and that the proposed rail line would create negative impacts to the emerging Dome District commercial area

After several public sessions and countless hours of volunteer time on the part of local architects and community members, an alternative proposal for the routing of the rail extension (resulting from the evaluation of over fifteen concepts) was selected by the community. Unfortunately, the alternative plan (known as Scheme F) was ultimately rejected by the City. Instead, the City Council endorsed Sound Transit’s proposed route alignment and elevated crossing at Pacific Avenue.

In 2007, the City established a Public Advisory Committee (PAC), the mission of which was to develop recommendations for the final design of the rail extension from D to M Street, and to present those recommendations to the City Council for consideration. The PAC, which was comprised of approximately thirty local citizens including Dome District President, Keith Stone, representatives of the Hillside Development Council, New Tacoma Neighborhood Council, Downtown Merchant Group, Dome District Development Group, Pierce Transit, Tacoma-Pierce County Chamber of Commerce, University of Washington and TACID. Local architect and Chapter member, Jim Merritt FAIA, was also part of the PAC. Ultimately presented six “Guiding Principles” and other recommendations to the City Council for the rail extension. The Council adopted the recommendations by Resolution (No. 37726) in January, 2009, and forwarded the recommendations to Sound Transit without amendment. However, in addition, the Council further provided Sound Transit with the following directives and guidance:

- C Street to remain open (to vehicles)
- A Street to be a grade separation (allowing pedestrian access but not vehicles)
- Pacific Avenue Bridge to be an open structure
- “D” to “M” Street to be built using post & beam construction “where it makes sense”, at the discretion of Sound Transit

Allowing Sound Transit to use its discretion with regard to post & beam structuring, essentially negated the recommendations made by the PAC to use no berms. Upon the release of the preliminary engineering drawings by Sound Transit, early in 2009, it became evident that earthen berms were being designed as the primary means of track elevation from “D” to “M” Street. Over the course of the year, the Dome District and other public stakeholders have implored the City to reject the use of berming.

As of October, 2009, Sound Transit has completed the design for the “D to M” extension, and is ready to commence with final construction and bidding documents for the project. Although a number of changes have been made to the project, most notably a two-pier bridge structure over the “B” Street Gulch, the design continues to rely on earth berming over the majority of the extension.



In August of 2009, AIASWW was approached by the Dome District to re-engage in the project efforts. The AIASWW Board agreed that the Chapter should continue to advocate for a better urban solution, supporting the principles and recommendations of the PAC. As with our previous involvement, graphics were needed to help the public better understand what was being proposed, and to provide 3-dimensional imagery of what the PAC recommendations intended. Two local intern architects from the Chapter volunteered their time to develop “Sketch-up” modeling of both the proposed Sound Transit design, along with a potential alternative for structuring the rail using post & beam. Several images from the completed model are included below.

To date, intern architects, Mark Hurley and Sean Ragudo, have invested over one hundred hours of volunteer time collectively to generate the model, which was initially based on 75% design level engineering drawings. Sound Transit and City of Tacoma Public Works representatives were invited to preview a draft of the model, which was beneficial in identifying several areas that needed work to provide a better representation of the proposed design. Sound Transit provided additional, more current design drawings to our volunteers who were then able to complete the modeling.

On October 5, AIASWW President, Randy Cook, presented the model at a public forum sponsored and organized by members of the Dome District. The forum, attended by more than eighty people, provided the public an opportunity to better visualize the berm conditions, and what an elevated structure might look like. Further, the model included potential building in-fill massing to provide the public with a better sense of how this area of the Dome District could grow in a very urban manner, with buildings up to the sidewalks and close to the tracks.

Conversely, a separate study prepared by consultants for the area earlier in 2009, suggests an open “gateway” concept with few buildings. Many stakeholders within the Dome District believe that there should not be such an open area, but rather, that available land be maximized for future development. We agree.

What does AIASWW advocate for?

Development within the Tacoma District will continue to evolve incrementally, as existing buildings are renovated and reused to serve those who currently live, work and play within this area. Tacoma’s urban and mixed use districts originally developed in an incremental manner, as commerce grew and people were drawn to the city by opportunity. While large developments will always have potential in Tacoma, small to medium sized developments can, and usually do play a more substantial role in activating streets with people, and further attracting new activity and development. Current businesses within the District are striving to attract customers and create a “Sense of Place”, whereby other businesses can be attracted to the activity. Each new business that has the ability to draw people to the street, is one step further towards regular pedestrian activity.

Decisions made about rail or any other infrastructure in the area must consider how the city can increase the probability of both short term and long term development. Short term, incremental development needs all the help it can get. Such infrastructure considerations must include maximizing potential land, and making that land attractive to the developing community (curb appeal), while reducing or eliminating the potential barriers to assembling and acquiring property.

We believe the berming of earth along the rail line will create at least two primary negative conditions:

1. Large portions of the track line will create a visual barrier, separating the District and conveying the image of a rural environment, not an urban environment.
2. As evidenced by other urban examples, such as Spokane, the area of berming within the eighty (80) foot track right of way will tend to discourage development, as developers are faced with the prospect of negotiating with Sound Transit to purchase right of way area, removing the berm material (while supporting the remaining earth with sheet piling or other means), and risking possible settlement of the tracks.



On the other hand, we believe the post and beam method will have the opposite effect:

1. Elevated structure, including pilings, will convey an urban environment, offering visual connectivity north and south, and boldly sending the message to the developing community that the city is serious about urban infill and attracting business.
2. The structured tracks will maximize potential land for development in the very areas where development should and can occur. Further, although prospective developers will still need to negotiate with Sound Transit for the purchase of land within the right of way, the ability to maximize the available and buildable land footprint, (without interfering with the track lines), will greatly increase the probability that development, even incremental smaller developments, will occur.

AIASWW encourages the citizens of Tacoma to contact your elected leaders on the City Council, and express your opinion on this issue. If you are convinced that the bermed, rural solution presently proposed by Sound Transit is the best for the City and the future of the Dome District, then say so. If you believe that a structured, urban solution is best for the City and the Dome District, then your City Council needs to hear this from you.

The Tacoma City Council is the body that has the ultimate authority to negotiate with Sound Transit. We are advocates for transit, and the successful extension of commuter rail. However, the extension must not compromise Tacoma's ability to fulfill its own goals. In the City's "Downtown Element" – City of Tacoma Comprehensive Plan (The Downtown Plan, adopted 12-9-08 which includes the area of the rail extension), seven strategic goals are stated:

1. Become a premier location of choice for primary target sectors
2. Foster an entrepreneurial culture and greater awareness of local, independent business
3. Stimulate investor interest in Downtown Tacoma
4. Develop Downtown Tacoma into a "talent magnet"
5. Support and expand the economic development agenda of the University of Washington, Tacoma
6. Increase retail opportunities in Downtown Tacoma
7. Raise the international profile of Downtown Tacoma

These goals extend through the Brewery District and into the Dome District. We believe these are excellent goals. While there are those who would argue that the bermed solution has no affect on these goals, AIASWW and the merchants and business owners who are most affected by this rail extension believe otherwise. We are asking that the City Council recognize the resulting impact that the bermed solution will have on the future of this re-emerging commercial district and Tacoma's desire to become a progressive, international city.

