

# 520 controversy cuts wide swath

Especially in Montlake, which will bear project's brunt

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The Evergreen Point Bridge has cracks in its high-rise supports and pontoons, but it is elsewhere on the span that gaps between problems and solutions loom larger.

Nowhere are the gaps as wide as in the freeway stretch between Union and Portage bays. Here, state Route 520 cuts through the Washington Park Arboretum and the Montlake neighborhood, passing south of the [University of Washington](#) and the man-made Montlake Cut -- and affecting the land, water and people in its path.

Federal agencies have expressed concerns about the effect of a new bridge and its columns on migrating chinook salmon, protected by the Endangered Species Act. Park lovers and neighbors want a lower bridge, while boaters and the [Coast Guard](#) want adequate bridge height and clear navigation channels.

Husky football fans worry about effects on game-day traffic, noise and pregame fetes if a proposed freeway ramp runs through their tailgating turf. Neighbors are fighting for the slimmest possible bridge footprint, while cyclists want assurances of a trans-lake bike path. Most in Montlake, the hardest hit neighborhood no matter what bridge plan is chosen, want transit, quiet pavement and noise walls -- but even the latter are controversial.

Everyone is worried about long-term construction -- and costs.

"The SR 520 project, especially in Montlake, is a minefield of controversies ... it is what is called a 'wicked problem,' " said [Rob Wilkinson](#), a Montlake resident and co-founder of Better Bridge, which promotes the six-lane Pacific Interchange option for a bridge replacement.

"But now is also an opportunity to bring people together on a shared vision for a new bridge," Wilkinson said. "It could be good for neighborhoods, for the Arboretum, for the environment -- it doesn't have to be gloom and doom. Division is unhelpful."

The positive intent, combined with some creative neighborhood and state problem-solving, has helped to move 520 planning along.

On Monday, the [Seattle City Council](#) hopes to pass a resolution aimed at demonstrating agreement on issues ranging from minimizing construction effects to air pollution and the taking of park land.

"This resolution is extremely well thought out and speaks to just about every concern I've ever heard mentioned by the project stakeholders," said [Jonathan Dubman](#), a Montlake resident and co-founder of Better Bridge.

He acknowledged that the council resolution most closely mirrors the Pacific Interchange option, without specifically naming it as the city's preferred alternative.

City officials acknowledge they are under orders from Gov. [Chris Gregoire](#) to find civic consensus at the bridge's west end before the bridge can be replaced. The governor in December stated her preference for a six-lane option, but surprised many by refusing to choose any of the four bridge-replacement proposals laid out in October in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

The DEIS triggered a flood of responses to the state [Department of Transportation](#) -- including statements from Arboretum supporters, the University of Washington, the [National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration](#) (fisheries) and the [Department of Interior](#).

Many of the responses blasted the Pacific Interchange option, but considered it the least onerous of the proposals.

In response to public comments, many from Montlake residents, WSDOT has taken a number of steps, including:

- Developing plans to reduce the overall footprint (width) of the bridge, including at Marsh and Foster islands (Arboretum).
- Moving the Pacific Street Interchange slightly to the west, reducing the numbers of columns across the Montlake Cut.
- Further study of so-called "quiet pavement" and other noise reduction strategies.
- Lowering the proposed 110-foot height of the Pacific Interchange's bridge.

"This project is a very difficult balancing act; there are trade-offs to everything you do. But that's what we're looking for -- west-side consensus," said [John Milton](#), WSDOT project manager for the 520 bridge project. Milton said there are significant challenges to the [Union Bay Alternative](#), in large part because it calls for a multilane tunnel beneath the Montlake Cut that would have to clear an already planned light rail tunnel. There are grade, cost and engineering dilemmas still being analyzed, Milton said.

Yet even Montlake neighbors who endorsed the front-running Pacific Interchange remain worried. Plans to keep traffic flowing on the current Evergreen Point Bridge while the new bridge is built to the north have many in the Montlake-Portage Bay corridor shuddering.

"Frankly, we want that bridge as far away from us as we can get it," said [Jack Sullivan](#), vice commodore of the [Seattle Yacht Club](#), a longtime fixture in Portage Bay that will experience claustrophobic space between a new bridge and its moorage docks.

While the club sent a letter to WSDOT supporting the Pacific Interchange over other alternatives, it has huge reservations about bridge construction and effects.

"We're going to be neighbors to that construction for a long, long time, and it's a big concern," Sullivan said. The [Arboretum and Botanical Garden Committee](#), a group composed of representatives from the UW, city of Seattle and the [Arboretum Foundation](#), has written a letter to the state Department of Transportation requesting that it further study three plans -- a submersible trans-lake tunnel, a four-lane "green" alternative and the Union Bay Alternative, an Arboretum bypass plan put forth by resident [Craig Dalby](#).

[Norm Arkans](#), spokesman for the UW, said the university continues to have concerns, including the effect of construction on traffic for university employees, students and the public heading to campus or the [University Medical Center](#).

Despite continuing controversies, there are increasing calls for getting on with the bridge-replacement process.

As Dubman put it: "It's a question of whether indecision and inaction are politically riskier at this point. Too many people are battle-weary because of the (Alaskan Way) viaduct. They want the grown-ups to make a decision."

Read more: <http://www.seattlepi.com/local/article/520-controversy-cuts-wide-swath-1233794.php#ixzz1TN9tctCz>