# THE PLANNING PROCESS & TRAFFIC IMPACT EQUITY

## A Community Approach to Neighborhood Integrity & Institutional Responsibility

Tip Johnson, Happy Valley tip@skookum.us February 29, 2004

Western Washington University has finally reached its limit for growth of a contiguous campus. The development of campus and the surrounding neighborhoods has left no room for continued growth. Arriving at an equitable, long-term and functional community design should now be the principal goal. Planning always raises eyebrows, but there are reasons the University's planning has occasioned extra concern.

**The Problem**

The results of each planning phase don't necessarily arrive at the next. For example, at the end of the planning phase for the original WWU Neighborhood Plan, the University agreed to vacate 21st Street between Bill McDonald Parkway and West College Way. This was to accommodate pedestrian movements between the University and Happy Valley, and to preclude the development of an arterial route involving 21st Street south of Bill McDonald Parkway. An earlier neighborhood effort had discouraged a proposed route using 24th and 23rd Streets to connect to Old Fairhaven Parkway. Despite years of "public process", 21st was not vacated but instead improved to an arterial standard that is now subject to yet further streamlined extension. It's not only the neighbors that don't understand.

The University's 1981 SEIS plainly stated that the prerequisite condition for an updated facility development plan had been met. Groping to find method to the University's planning, the City's Planning Commission packet for June 5, 1997, ponders that, "the subsequent 1987 South Campus Master Plan appears to be the comprehensive plan update referred to in Western's 1981 SEIS." The obvious chronology problem pales compared to the recognition of many years elapsing without any regulatory oversight guiding campus development. It is no wonder that parking requirements were not met.

The playing field of University planning doesn't seem level to the neighbors. The relationship tilts not only because of the University's access to seemingly endless funding for road projects, but because the University enjoys the rare privilege, as project proponent, of acting as their own lead agent for review. This allows the scope of review to be limited and the flow of information guided in ways particularly advantageous to the University. The common complaint of a "piecemeal approach" is one result. Another is a rare sense of authority, as when the University initiated this planning phase, in 1997, by unilaterally red-lining a sixty acre "Acquisition Zone" in Happy Valley. Neighbors heard the University aggressively assert "full independent authority to prepare and implement its master plan" - a position never actually retracted. Neighbors learned the University had sought and received approval from the HEC board to commence acquisition – even though the property was not zoned for institutional use. Rightly, neighbors wondered whether the zoning promulgated through prior public process really promised their property any protection.

These factors contribute to distrust among the University's neighbors who have watched checkerboard acquisitions and negligent or transitional property management practices create impacts that erode neighborhood character and suppress property values in advance of successive University expansions. Even the priceless, historic cabins of author June and Farrar

Burns lie in ruins within this project area. These important features of our neighborhoods' heritage waste neglected in the woods, uncannily symbolizing the neighborhoods' experience with the University. Neighbors sometimes feel as futile trying to save their neighborhood as students have been in their efforts to save the cabins.

**Breaking the Cycle**

Breaking this cycle is the key to building trust. Fortunately, building a responsible, long-term solution ought to be relatively easy. But it will require new policies for University growth and new ideas about campus design. Such a strategy should focus on integrating campus with downtown and the newly available central waterfront where nearly fifty acres of public land lies idle at public expense. The good news is that everyone can benefit from the effort.

The University needs to officially acknowledge that the limit to a contiguous campus has been reached. Policies that provide against further incursion into the neighborhoods should be adopted. The University needs new policies that prioritize campus lands for academic use and that identify functions to be moved off-campus. For instance, the "ten minute walk" policy should be supplemented with a "five minute shuttle" alternative from parking provided through a consortium of private and public resources downtown.

Campus development need not grind to a halt. The University has relatively vast lands blighted by surface parking. A campus development strategy is needed that responsibly integrates utilization of these remaining lands with off-campus parking or parking structures and transit infrastructure that can protect neighborhoods from adverse traffic impacts. Impacts to the neighborhoods can never be adequately mitigated, whereas the whole community benefits by growing campus into properties, as downtown, already zoned for institutional use, or land, like the central waterfront, already in public ownership.

Once we accept that the limit to growth of a contiguous campus has been reached, it is far more efficient to round campus with buildings than roads. It creates a more cohesive academic enclave, minimizes roadway construction and impervious surface. It simplifies access to various parts of campus, makes managing traffic demand possible and enforcement easier. Perimeter roads always leave open the question of what is on the other side. Without policies acknowledging that future expansion will be off-campus and that traffic demand will be strictly managed, a perimeter road network represents a continuing threat to the neighborhoods – a threat clearly recognized from the past.

**A Proposed Solution**

The proposed Valley Alignment would "manage" traffic demand. It would be open to the public and possibly used by commuters after hours. However, prioritizing pedestrian, bicycle and transit movements would normally discourage through traffic. At each end of the route, drop-off points would be incorporated and signs would advise vehicles to yield and warn about possible long delays. The route would remain open for all, but used mainly by students and University. Yielding to pedestrians and transit would train commuters to use other routes. In time, the route might be managed with temporary closures as currently practiced on High Street.

The Traffic Demand Management route accommodates additional playfields, opens the "valley green", allows for the complete closure of West College Way and naturally

mitigates the other identified traffic problems on Garden, Highland and the intersection at 25th. It will reduce transit dollars for fuel and brake linings by avoiding the significant grade change along West College Way and Highland Drive.

More importantly, the route achieves Traffic Impact Equity with the neighbors. Municipalities readily grant home occupation permits for businesses in residential areas, so long as they are operated in the principal dwelling. The theory is that if the operator can live with it, so can the neighbors. Finding a way to manage traffic at levels acceptable to the University is critical because traffic collected by further arterializations will unavoidably distribute itself through the "multiple doorways" that are part of the University's new circulation strategy.

Roadways collect traffic. Bigger, faster roads collect even more. Three days after the Mercer Island Interstate-90 improvements were complete, 80% of the excess capacity planned for the next twenty years was filled. The only way to avoid congestion in and around campus, and thence the neighborhoods, is by avoiding construction of an arterial alignment – period. The idea that campus should not encourage any through traffic has recurred frequently during this review. At least, the University should not proceed before the City has undertaken the long delayed comprehensive circulation study for the south side. Piecemealing together an arterial route where none ought to be planned would be unfairly detrimental to the neighbors in the South Hill, Sehome and Happy Valley neighborhoods.

We know that cars prevail due to market inefficiencies, subsidies and hidden costs. Both the University and the neighbors feel these costs when traffic and parking adversely impact their areas. Traffic is known to be a powerful and destructive force in neighborhoods. The University tries to avoid the effects by exporting them to the neighborhoods. The neighbors, however, want to maintain a safe environment for their children and a peaceful place for their families. If the roads are built, the cars will come. The only solution is to build the roads differently. That is the purpose of a Traffic Demand Management alignment. The transportation policy work has all been done. Academic institutions should be the first to embrace the conclusions and implement appropriate programs.

In transportation generally, it is factors that don't really make sense that drive the choices that don't really work. The cycle leads inevitably to gridlock, smog, accidents, delays and further expense. The system is perpetuated by lack of the political will to correct market inefficiencies, reduce subsidies or charge for hidden costs.

The University has a unique opportunity to achieve its aims and demonstrate modern community-based transportation planning as an example for other college campuses and neighborhoods alike. This will require owning up to the problem of trip generation, facing the responsibility squarely, and assembling the appropriate policies and the resolve needed to impose adequate management measures. Doing so will open the door to better long-range planning and forever cement a healthier relationship with the neighborhoods and the community at large. Even in the short term, it will cost less and deliver more.

# WWU CAMPUS ROADWAY DEVELOPMENT PREDESIGN

## Initial Concerns Regarding Internal Inconsistencies and Artificial Constraints

Tip Johnson, Happy Valley tip@skookum.us February 3, 2004

The structure of the University's goals and objectives for roadway development contain several internal inconsistencies. A comprehensive roadway strategy for campus requires resolution of these issues:

**1) Circulation and Modal Conflicts:**
The University wants to "improve circulation" and "reduce conflicts" with pedestrians and bicycles. Unfortunately, the chief means and measure of "improved circulation" is faster moving cars. That is unlikely to reduce conflicts. During the last Comprehensive Plan process, the University agreed to vacate 21st Street, in part to accommodate the massive pedestrian movements between campus and Happy Valley. Instead, the University built a full scale boulevard on that route. This is meant to be extended to create a streamlined South Hill Arterial route. Another route still exists along the trail paralleling the service road behind Fairhaven College. The University now proposes to build another road along this Arboretum Alignment. Building faster roads will not reduce conflicts. A third, interior route exists, but is also scheduled for additional roadway.

**2) Levels of Service and Reducing Traffic:**
The University wants to reduce traffic in and around campus, yet it is bent upon replacing the circuitous route across campus with a streamlined South Hill Arterial. The City has anticipated this eventuality with curb, gutter and paving improvements along much of Garden Street this summer. Building a more convenient route over South Hill is not likely to reduce traffic in and around campus. It is more likely to become a popular alternative as traffic increases on the Boulevard and Samish Way. When southbound drivers find Bill McDonald Parkway bottlenecked behind Samish Way, they will inevitably "rat run" along Highland to Knox into Fairhaven or down 21st or 25th to Donovan or Douglas to Old Fairhaven Parkway and the freeway. Northbound drivers encountering slowdowns on Garden will dodge helter-skelter through the neighborhood to find Forest or Cornwall to Holly, etc.

Maintaining designated Levels of Service implies the eventual reclassification of streets, removal of on-street parking to widen lanes, and increased speed limits according to the 85th percentile rule. This vicious cycle will never satisfy either the neighbors or the University.

**3) Reducing Roadway and Limiting External Impacts:**
The University wants to reduce the overall amount of roadway and impacts on the adjacent neighborhoods. This is inconsistent with the policy of forcing traffic and parking toward the perimeter, away from campus. The main thrust is to replace a single, central route (Bill McDonald Pkwy, South Campus Drive, West College Way, Highland, Garden) with alternative peripheral routes. The University will actually be increasing the amount of paved, traveled way - spending millions of dollars to tear up and replace still serviceable roads. A campus perimeter loop formerly defined by West and East College

Ways is meant to be extended and replaced, following 21st to Bill McDonald Pkwy to the proposed Sehome Alignment (behind Fairhaven College at one or the other corners of the Commissary). The second tactical prong of the strategy is to consolidate land by removing internal roads – for playfields, the Valley Green, buildings or whatever. However, the perimeter strategy creates access problems. Very little, if any, land will actually be consolidated. Roads torn up are being put back down, and then some. The University concerns itself with roadway design and revision because it can. If neighborhoods enjoyed the same resource and ability, the eventual outcome could be very different.

From a Normal School to a significant State University, Western has known only growth. The University's perspective is steeped in their own experience of growth and development. Theirs is very different from neighbors, who have witnessed mostly degradation as Western has grown. Even as education is the public's business, and Western an essential public facility, it is still a business. Its growth at times is at odds with the desire for stability and tranquility held by residents of Happy Valley, Sehome and South Hill. These neighborhoods have seen the most dramatic growth and transition of any in Bellingham. Neighbors continue to enjoy many aspects of the University, but the relationship has not been all good. Traffic and its effects have, and will continue to (ahem) "drive" the issues.

**4) Scope:**
This is the issue of artificial constraint. The study area for this predesign effort is punctuated to avoid any contemplation of greater campus or city-wide integration. The implications of proposed elements extend well beyond the study area. Where will the road behind Fairhaven College go? How will the South Hill Arterial function in the city-wide network? What impact will the "multiple doorways" policy have on neighborhoods or the University? Will these questions remain outside the scope of the committee's mission? Should the University build successive pieces of any circulation plan without comprehensive review?

**Conclusions:**
The University's "givens" for the predesign committee may need reconsideration. One central route up "the valley" better reduces overall roadway, makes calming and enforcement more efficient and management of ancillary access easier. Rounding the campus perimeter with a mix of buildings and parking - rather than roadway - better achieves the objectives of the predesign committee's charge, better meets the objectives of the Institutional master Plan and will create a better academic community ambience. A central route will provide a campus experience valuable to students, parents and visitors, but could be managed to discourage local commuters.

At least, if the University cannot accept the proposal in spite of its better meeting the stated criteria, then at least they might better appreciate Happy Valley's protective position on 21st Street and the skepticism about providing "front doors" for the University. A Traffic Demand Management approach like a central valley alignment would make sharing the doorway much more palatable. The good news is that the University and the neighborhood both agree - that automobiles destroy the desired

ambience and character. This fact has become an emblematic icon of New Urbanism. The bad news is that the University has authority to implement change while neighborhoods are powerless except to watch in horror.

Notwithstanding a longstanding, admitted need, neighborhood plan updates and several University roadway revisions, the City has yet to update an area-wide circulation plan – in spite of large-scale residential potential looming immanently in the South Neighborhood. Sehome, South Hill and Happy Valley will need plenty of persistence, resolve and money to counter the traffic impacts from a South Hill Arterial. Otherwise, as happened in the past, properties adversely impacted by unhealthy transitional patterns may eventually be subsumed under campus extension. Let's break that cycle now.

A more innovative approach is needed. The solution should maintain a cohesive academic campus ambience and prevent further neighborhood degradation. A commitment should be made to a truly pedestrian environment and real transportation alternatives. Single occupancy vehicles should be seriously de-prioritized. The University should redefine their notion of campus design, transit service delivery and community relations.

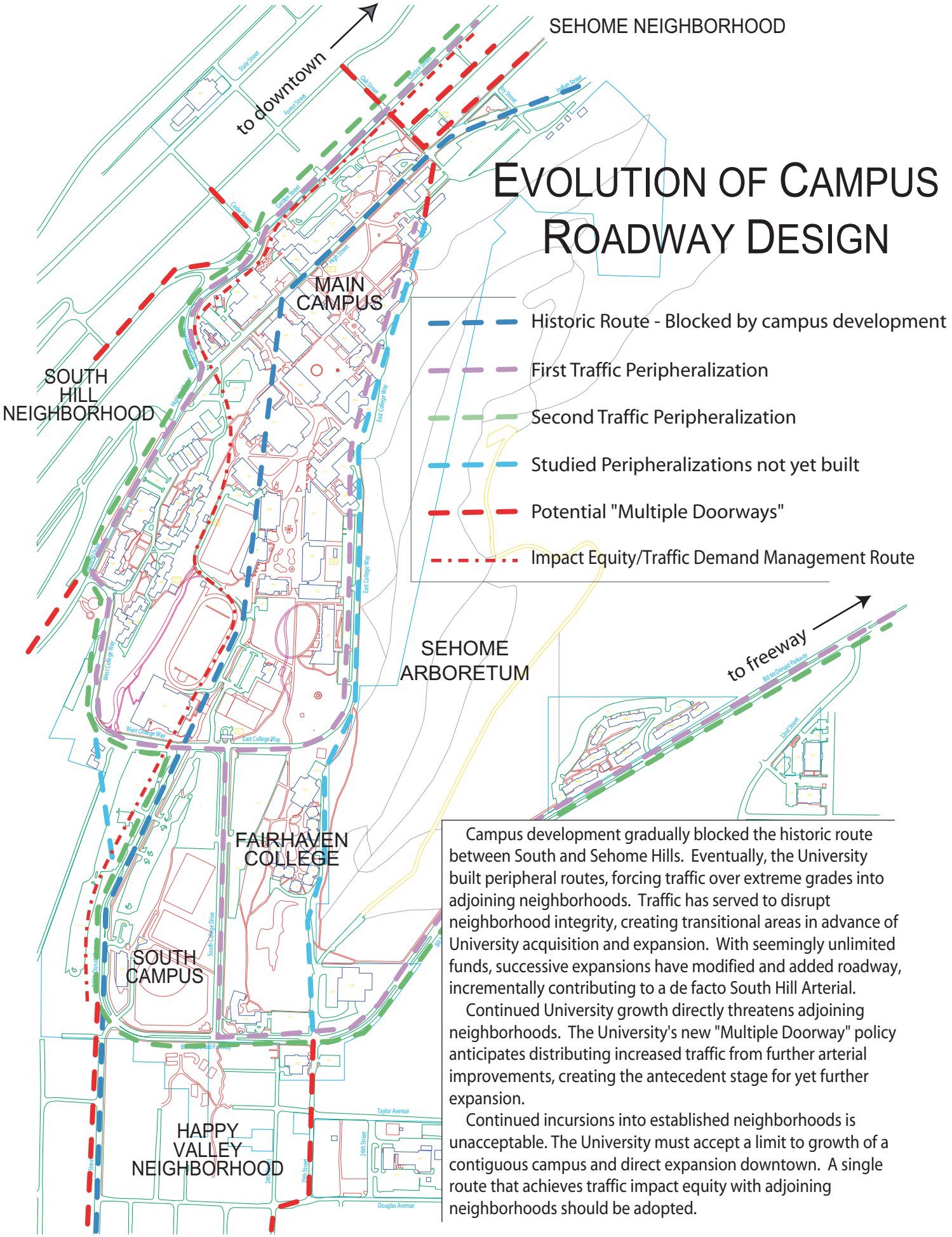
The University should reconsider their "multiple doorways" approach. Doorways open both ways. The University may end up not wanting the traffic either. A more limited access facility will be safer, easier to manage and better fulfill the University's needs.

The City and University should dovetail their bonding capacity and development efforts to create adequate parking resources where reciprocal demands of academic, commercial and residential parking can maximize user fees. The University and Whatcom Transit Authority should immediately commence planning for Group Rapid Transit to at least cross campus, hopefully planned to connect Happy Valley and Fairhaven with the Central Waterfront and Downtown.

The University must begin looking toward downtown and the waterfront for further expansion, for solutions to parking and growth requirements. The University can never mitigate adverse impacts to the diverse and functional housing stocks in adjoining neighborhoods. But moving non-academic services downtown would greatly benefit everyone. Campus lands should first fulfill needs related to the University's academic mission. Bridging Bellingham's traditional "Town and Gown" divide promises more and better solutions to the University's long-term needs and aesthetic interests. We will only benefit from achieving better integration of the University with the community.

Tip Johnson graduated from Fairhaven College with a concentration in "Community: Systems and Structures". His senior project, "The Heart of Happy Valley", conceived what is now Connelly Creek Nature Area - a 23 acre nature preserve and greenways corridor on Bellingham's south side. He founded, owned and operated Fairhaven Boatworks for fifteen years, pioneering services for traditional small boats and public access to the waterfront. He served eight years on the Bellingham City Council representing Bellingham's south side. Tip has a history of results-oriented activism in the public's interest, working for a clean environment, a healthy economy and good government. He recently worked with the Federal Transit Administration and Department of Commerce on Transit Development Missions to Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and Nigeria. Tip is currently raising two daughters on Bellingham's south side within an extended community interested in gardens and sustainable community.

# Evolution of Campus Roadway Design

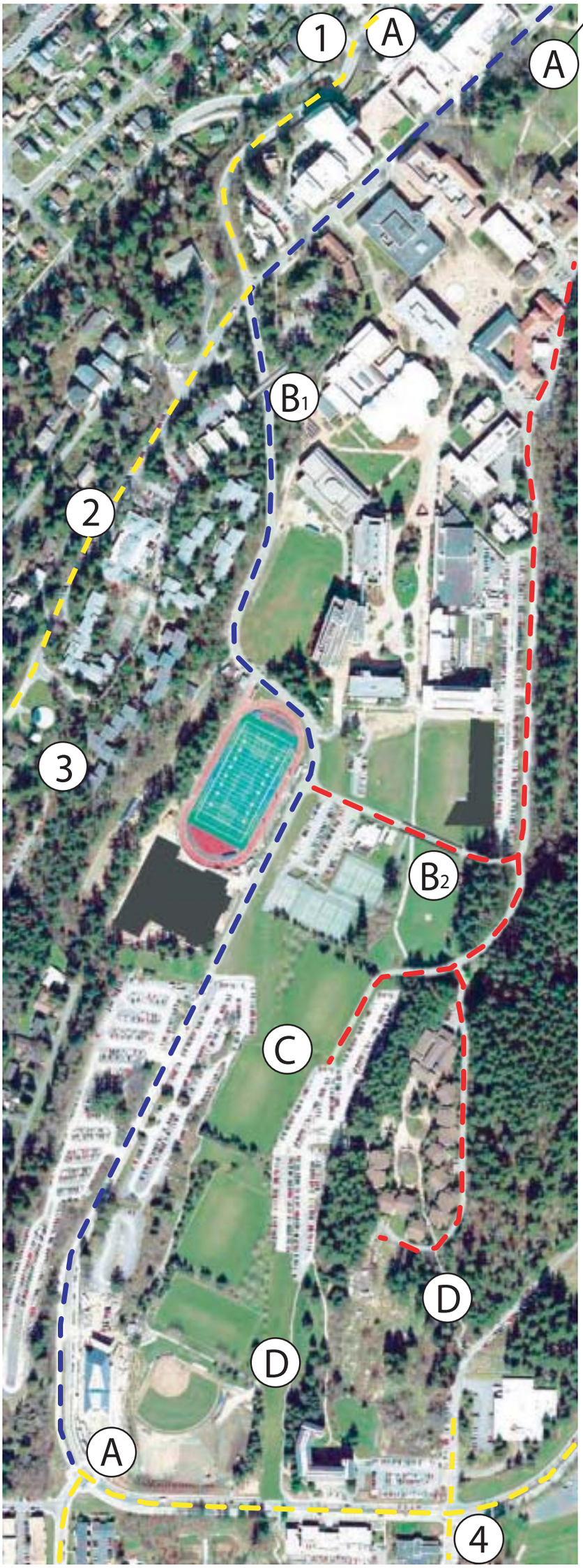



Campus development gradually blocked the historic route between South and Sehome Hills. Eventually, the University built peripheral routes, forcing traffic over extreme grades into adjoining neighborhoods. Traffic has served to disrupt neighborhood integrity, creating transitional areas in advance of University acquisition and expansion. With seemingly unlimited funds, successive expansions have modified and added roadway, incrementally contributing to a de facto South Hill Arterial.

Continued University growth directly threatens adjoining neighborhoods. The University's new "Multiple Doorway" policy anticipates distributing increased traffic from further arterial improvements, creating the antecedent stage for yet further expansion.

Continued incursions into established neighborhoods is unacceptable. The University must accept a limit to growth of a contiguous campus and direct expansion downtown. A single route that achieves traffic impact equity with adjoining neighborhoods should be adopted.

# AN INTEGRATED TRAFFIC DEMAND MANAGEMENT ROUTE
## Creating a Campus Experience - NOT a South Hill Arterial




THE NEGLECTED ALIGNMENT

This exhibit depicts the alignment steadfastly neglected by the University during this and previous advisory reviews. Neighbors have continued to urge the consideration of this route as a basis for comparing the achievement of goals by alternative routes. First, this route most efficiently meets the University's stated goals and objectives, maximizing public benefit while minimizing public costs. Second, it permits strict management of the route according to pedestrian, bicycle and transit priorities, naturally mitigating the tendency for road improvements to attract additional traffic. Finally, this is the route that does not drive adverse effects into adjoining neighborhoods. It assures traffic impact equity by limiting incentives for through traffic to levels acceptable to the University itself. Other routes leave future problems to the neighborhoods to solve.

A CAMPUS EXPERIENCE

This route can be managed to create a unique campus experience for students, parents and visitors with direct interests in campus. In this context, it will never become a favored alternative to existing arterial access to remote destinations.

AN IRRATIONAL FRAMEWORK

The advisory project scope is too limited. Effects of roadway revisions reach well beyond the project boundary. This permits a piecemeal approach that disadvantages adjoining neighborhoods.

The parameter ranking regime is so non-specific in weighting alternatives that it cannot meaningfully integrate stated goals and objectives. It is designed to advantage the University's prior preferred Arboretum alignment behind Fairhaven College.

The goal framework is inconsistent. Neighbors have identified and unsuccessfully requested prioritization of the following contradictions:

1) Improved circulation vs. reduced conflicts,
2) Arterial improvements vs. reduced traffic,
3) Peripheralized transportation facilities vs. reduced neighborhood impacts.

Impacts from University expansion have long been a factor in neighborhoods adjoining campus. Neighbors ask for a comprehensive review and a community-wide approach to problem-solving. Evaluating this alignment and working to create a rational framework will improve the advisory effort.

**FEATURES:**

**A - Provide drop-off facilities**
**B1 - Pedestrian overpass**
**B2 - Pedestrian underpass (bridge deck)**
**C - Extra playfields**
**D - Maintain structural grades for emergency access**
**1 - Reduce traffic volume and speed**
**2 - Reduce conficts with angle parking**
**3 - Eliminate curve and grade**
**4 - Reduce cross traffic**

**Normal traffic management**
**Route managed for pedestrian, bicycle and transit priorities**
**Route limited to permit access**