

March 2, 2020

## MEMORANDUM

**To:** Transportation and Utilities Committee Members  
**From:** Lish Whitson, Analyst  
**Subject:** Council Bill 119745: University of Washington Skybridges

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On Wednesday, March 4, 2020 the Transportation and Utilities Committee will consider [Council Bill \(CB\) 119745](#), which would grant approval to maintain five skybridges linking the University of Washington’s central campus to other parts of the campus. The CB would grant approval for an initial 10-year term, which can be renewed for two subsequent 10-year terms, up to a total of 30 years. The skybridges are located as follows:

1. One skybridge, the 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue Bridge, crossing 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue NE north of NE Campus Parkway, connecting Schmitz Hall to the Henry Art Gallery;
2. Two skybridges, the Pacific/Hitchcock and Pacific/T-Wing bridges, crossing NE Pacific Street, between 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue Northeast and Northeast Pacific Place, connecting the UW’s Medical Center and Health Sciences buildings to the central campus; and
3. Two skybridges, the Montlake/Wahkiakum and Montlake/Whatcom bridges, crossing Montlake Boulevard NE, connecting the central campus to the athletic facilities and parking lots in the east campus.

Because these skybridges each cross a city street, approval must be granted by the City Council pursuant to [Seattle Municipal Code \(SMC\) Chapter 15.64 “Term Permits”](#). Each skybridge was approved under four previous ordinances, whose terms have expired. CB 119745 grants approval for the skybridges for a new term and consolidates all University of Washington skybridge approvals under one bill.

This memorandum summarizes the skybridge approval process and describes the effect of CB 119745, including the terms in CB 119745 that are intended to protect the public’s interest.

### **Skybridge Term Permits**

A skybridge is a structure that provides for pedestrian access over a City street or right-of-way. SMC Chapter 15.64 establishes the procedures and criteria for approval of skybridges. The City’s general policy is to limit the proliferation of skybridges. When the City grants approval for a skybridge, the City’s approval is for a fixed length of time. Generally, the City grants approval for a ten-year term, renewable two times for a total term of thirty years.

[SMC 15.64.086.C](#) identifies thirteen considerations for the renewal of skybridge term permits upon the expiration of a term:

1. Adequacy of horizontal and vertical clearance;
2. Any known conflicts with existing or proposed utilities, street lighting, traffic control devices, or other upcoming transportation projects;
3. View blockage;
4. Interruption or interference with existing streetscape or other street amenities;
5. Impacts due to reduction of natural light;
6. Reduction of and effect on pedestrian activity at street level;
7. Number of pedestrians that currently use the skybridge;
8. Effect on commerce and enjoyment of neighboring land uses;
9. Availability of reasonable alternatives;
10. Changed conditions in the vicinity since original installation;
11. Effect on traffic and pedestrian safety;
12. Accessibility for the elderly and handicapped; and
13. The public benefit mitigation elements, or changes to the existing public benefit mitigation elements, provided by the proposal.

Once the Director of the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT Director) reviews the term permit renewal petition, the SDOT Director transmits a recommendation to the City Council. The Council's review of the proposal considers the thirteen items noted above. [SMC 15.64.087.A](#) describes the conditions under which the Council can approve an application for a skybridge:

“The City Council shall not approve an application to continue to maintain and operate an existing skybridge upon term expiration unless it finds that continued maintenance and operation of the skybridge is in the public interest and no reasonable alternative to the skybridge exists.”

If it determines that it is appropriate to grant a new term for an existing skybridge, the Council may impose terms and conditions on the renewal. The Council must, in its approval of a skybridge term permit, “preserve the right to require the permittee to remove the skybridge at the permittee's sole cost and expense if necessary.”

### **University of Washington Skybridges**

There are eight skybridges that connect the University of Washington's central campus to the other parts of the campus. CB 119745 would grant approval of a new term for five of those

skybridges.<sup>1</sup> These skybridges provide pedestrians and bicyclists with connections between the central campus and facilities, dormitories and businesses to the west, south and east of the campus. They allow pedestrians to navigate significant grade changes between the central campus and the surrounding area. And they separate pedestrian activity from principal arterials. The need for each of these skybridges was described in a [presentation](#) given to the Seattle Design Commission in 2016.

In 2016, skybridges collectively carried almost 28,000 pedestrians a day, over arterials used by 88,000 vehicles a day. The bridges each provide vertical clearances to accommodate Washington State's tallest vehicles. They do not interfere with view corridors, or interrupt or interfere with existing streetscape or street amenities. Generally, they are located in areas without significant street-level uses. The 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue bridge provides a connection between the University and the Ave. Of the five skybridges that are the subject of CB 119745, three include stairs. Only the bridges that cross NE Pacific Street are Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliant.

As a public benefit, the University has made improvements to a 1.8-mile segment of the Burke-Gilman Trail located between Pacific Street and Rainier Vista. It will maintain these improvements for the life of the skybridges. These improvements include:

1. Widening the trail width from 14 feet to 21 feet;
2. Separating pedestrians and bike users;
3. Providing bicycle shelters and new trail furnishings;
4. Creating "mixing zones" to consolidate intersection points on the trail, including bicycle parking;
5. Replacing non-ADA compliant connections with universal access infrastructure, including ADA improvements at the Pacific/Hitchcock and Pacific/T-Wing skybridges;
6. Installing new transit plaza on Northeast Pacific Street, with improved security features;
7. Installing new vertical circulation between the trail and the overpass of Pacific Street and transit plaza;
8. Installing signalization and crosswalk improvements on 15th Avenue Northeast; and
9. Improving sightlines, lighting levels, and other principles of "Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The other three skybridges are the Hec Ed Bridge, the Rainier Vista bridge, and a set of bridges owned and operated by Sound Transit that connect to the University of Washington Light Rail Station. These bridges are not affected by this legislation.

<sup>2</sup> Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design is defined as a multi-disciplinary approach for reducing crime through urban and environmental design and the management and use of built environments.

## Conditions of Approval

CB 119745 contains several conditions in order to protect the public interest. These conditions include:

1. Requiring removal of the skybridges at the University's expense if the term permit is not renewed (Section 2).
2. Requiring that the University provide the City with information supporting the renewal of the skybridges prior to the completion of the term (Section 3).
3. Requiring that the University provide an evaluation and analysis of the feasibility and potential timeline for:
  - a. providing at grade crossings instead of skybridges;
  - b. replacing the two Montlake skybridges with one new skybridge; and
  - c. making all skybridges compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Section 3).
4. Protecting utilities from any damage resulting from activity related to the skybridges (Section 4).
5. Reserving the right to terminate approval if:
  - a. Council determines that space occupied by a skybridge is needed for a public use or benefit;
  - b. Use of a skybridge is abandoned;
  - c. Any term of the ordinance is violated and not corrected (Section 5).
6. Requiring the removal of a skybridge if a term expires and is not renewed (Section 6).
7. Requiring the University to maintain the skybridges in a good and safe condition (Section 7).
8. Requiring closure or removal of a skybridge if it becomes unsafe (Section 8).
9. Releasing, defending, holding harmless and indemnifying the City in case of any legal action (Section 10).
10. Maintaining insurance (Sections 11-13).
11. Allowing inspections of the skybridges and paying fees to cover the costs of inspections (Sections 15 and 16).
12. Paying an annual fee of \$36,816.40, adjusted annually (Section 17).
13. Providing and maintaining the public benefits listed above. (Section 20).

CB 119745, if adopted, would be in effect for ten years. The SDOT Director or the City Council would have the authority to renew the permission for up to two additional 10-year periods.

cc: Kirstan Arestad, Executive Director  
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