

John Lombard, Candidate for City Council, District 5: Position Statement on Aurora

Aurora Avenue North is the most neglected place in the City of Seattle. It will not remain so if I am elected to the City Council.

More than ten years ago, the City and the State of Washington partnered to plan a major renovation of north Aurora. But they abandoned it. In 2012, the City updated its community plan for Broadview, Bitter Lake, and Haller Lake. One of the top priorities was the development of “an Aurora Avenue North Corridor Plan...to include sidewalks and transit facilities that support RapidRide, access to business and drainage.” But it never moved forward. In 2015, the City advertised an upgrade to Aurora as part of the Move Seattle levy. It disappeared from the implementation plan. In 2018, when the State planned to repave north Aurora, it offered to partner with the City so that sidewalk and other improvements could be made at the same time. The City declined.

All of this blatantly contradicts City policy. In Seattle’s “2035 Growth and Equity Analysis,” the City identifies the Bitter Lake Urban Village (centered on Aurora) as one of its top five priority places for investment citywide. Given Bitter Lake’s high risk of displacement from growth and low access to opportunity, official City policy is to “advance economic mobility and opportunity,...promote transportation mobility and connectivity, and develop healthy and safe neighborhoods” there.

The communities to the east and west of Aurora in the Bitter Lake area bely the stereotype of affluent, white north Seattle. They are some of the most diverse and vulnerable places in the City: to the east, 73% of the students at Northgate Elementary School qualify for free and reduced-cost lunches, 82% are students of color, and 35% are English language learners; to the west, at Broadview-Thomson Elementary School, the same numbers are 56%, 67% and 28%. The RapidRide E Line along Aurora is Metro’s most crowded bus route, with 17,000 boardings a day. The densest development anywhere along North Aurora is in the Bitter Lake Urban Village, with more than 2,500 units within two blocks of Aurora to the west and more than 1,000 units within a few blocks to the east. That is precisely where Aurora lacks sidewalks on at least one side for 1.5 miles.

What is going on? Lack of political leadership, first and foremost. Councilmember Debora Juarez, elected as District 5’s first representative in 2015, has done little to make North Aurora a true priority for the City. Before her election, so far as I am aware there was only one member of the City Council who lived in what became District 5 in the more than 60 years since it was annexed to the City. Make no mistake, change on Aurora does require leadership, because there is opposition, from some of the long-time businesses there. In 2008, citing the State Environmental Policy Act, the Aurora Avenue Merchants Association (AAMA) twice successfully challenged the City’s review of the plan that the State and City had developed for Aurora. Regarding the process, the AAMA was correct: the City’s “Determination of Non-Significance” was wrong. The improvements being proposed for Aurora were very significant (therefore requiring an Environmental Impact Statement). Very significant for the tens of thousands of people who would benefit from a safer, more vibrant, more attractive Aurora. But very significant, too, for the many businesses on Aurora that have depended on its historic auto-orientation or the lower property values and rent that have come with its neglect by the City.

North Aurora needs political leadership to help it transition out of its past, with as few growing pains as possible. Its auto-orientation is built-in: it began as the “Aurora Speedway” in the 1930s. Many of the motels that cluster along it date back to that era. But Aurora has been in decline ever since I-5 became the new route of choice to get out of town in the 1960s. By the 1980s, North Aurora had become—and

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remains—one of the region’s two main “tracks” for prostitution (the other being Pacific Highway South). North Aurora also has become a major center for drug dealing (crack cocaine in the 1980s, heroin and other opioids today). While it gets little attention from the Seattle Department of Transportation or the City’s Office of Planning and Community Development, North Aurora definitely gets the attention of the Seattle Police Department.

The City of Shoreline incorporated in 1995 and its City Council quickly made changing Aurora, the City’s Main Street, a top priority. Hundreds of millions of dollars later (with most coming from the federal and state governments), Aurora in Shoreline has been transformed. It is far safer, far more attractive, and more prosperous than before. Many old businesses remain and some lots are still awaiting redevelopment—but that should be an encouragement to established businesses on the Seattle side of the City line. Transformation will not be instant or total. Transformation, however, can and will also be good for businesses—even many of the established ones.

In Edmonds and Lynnwood to the north and Tukwila to the south, Highway 99 is also very different from Seattle, just as it is now in Shoreline. They all have sidewalks. There are street trees. And businesses are thriving.

In Seattle, North Aurora could be even more than this. North Aurora could be the center of communities—similar to Lake City, which also has a state highway running through it, on the east side of District 5. North Aurora cuts through two urban villages in Seattle: the Aurora-Licton Springs Residential Urban Village, from North 84th Street to the south end of the Evergreen-Washelli Cemetery; and the Bitter Lake Hub Urban Village, from the north end of the cemetery to the city line at North 145th Street. These two urban villages were created in 1994 as part of the City’s growth strategy. Perhaps more than any other urban villages in Seattle, though, at the time they were simply lines on a map, enclosing areas of greater density. They were not communities. They crossed Aurora, but Aurora divided them, repelling attention. Surrounding neighborhoods focused away from it, rather than towards each other.

That is no longer completely the case for Aurora-Licton Springs, where the community group Aurora Licton Urban Village (ALUV) formed in 2015 to “Build Community Together.” Aurora-Licton includes parts of five different neighborhoods: Licton Springs, Greenwood, Green Lake, Haller Lake and Bitter Lake. ALUV has focused on pedestrian improvements to make Aurora safer and more welcoming, and on zoning changes that could provide for mixed-use development (retail and commercial on the first floor, residential above) on and near Aurora. It also has sponsored a visioning project and a strategic plan for its business district, which lies predominantly along Aurora. The strategic plan identifies many near-term actions that could improve the cleanliness and safety of Aurora and better meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable people who live there. Longer-term, the plan also calls for a comprehensive and inclusive visioning process for the urban village as a whole, which could address the tensions among businesses and residents about the neighborhood’s future. Such a visioning process should ultimately guide future zoning and capital investments for Aurora.

In Bitter Lake, the Broadview-Bitter Lake Community Council and the Haller Lake Community Club take a strong interest in Aurora, but there is no community group focused on the Hub Urban Village. Over the last 20 years, City planning has concentrated new, dense development on Linden, one long block west of Aurora, with the hope of creating a “Village Center” there. The 2012 update of the Broadview-Bitter Lake-Haller Lake Neighborhood Plan includes this vision for what Aurora itself could become:

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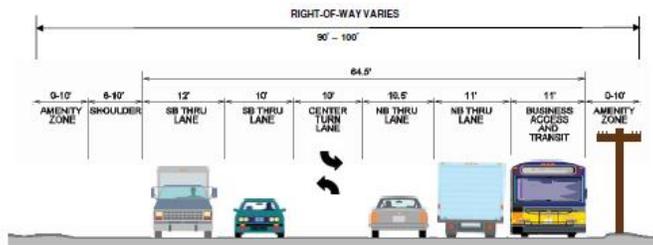
Bitter Lake Village on Aurora Ave. N has many of the larger, regional shops and services [while Linden is more localized]. With [Aurora's] high quality development, wide sidewalks, safe crossings, attractive streetscape and comfortable transit stops, it is a destination for shoppers and a link to surrounding areas. A connected network of sidewalks, pathways and bicycle trails enables neighbors to comfortably walk or bicycle from their homes to Aurora Ave. N and other business districts, schools, parks, and community facilities.

This idyll, however, is a planner's vision. It might be attractive to many people who live in the Hub Urban Village and surrounding neighborhoods, but it is not a vision that fundamentally came from them. As with Aurora-Licton, Bitter Lake needs a comprehensive visioning process for its future that is truly inclusive of its diverse residents and businesses. Without a group that has arisen organically within the urban village, like ALUV, this will require an even greater investment of effort from the City. But if the City makes clear it is prepared to act on what comes out of such a process, it should be successful in helping a representative group to form. And if Bitter Lake Village on Aurora begins to look something more like a true urban village, I am confident that its residents and businesses will continue working as a group to take ownership of their future.

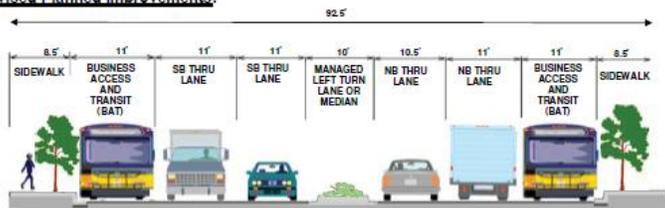
It is past time for the City to act on its stated and re-stated visions, principles, and priorities regarding North Aurora. Seattle must follow through with a coordinated strategy of investments in community planning, road and pedestrian improvements, public amenities, and economic development for this badly neglected area. The City's own Growth and Equity strategy demands no less. North Aurora needs a District 5 Council representative with the commitment and the skills to make it happen.

Images below are from SDOT's 2008 plan for Aurora

Existing Cross-section



SDOT Revised Planned Improvements:



- 92.5' out-to-out roadway section
- Match existing lane widths
- 8.5' sidewalks
- 11' BAT Lane (Business Access and Transit)
- 10' Median/left-turn lane
- Double lefts at N 145th Street (EB, WB, SB)