

The Promise of Seattle Boulevards



Interlaken Boulevard. Photo by Seattle Neighborhood Greenways

A report by Seattle Neighborhood Greenways (SNG) for the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation (SPR), the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods (DON), and the Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks (FSOP).

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Ravenna Boulevard. Photo from Google

Executive Summary

The Promise of Seattle Boulevards 2016 is an attempt to look at the best use of current boulevards and help to determine how they can function equitably as both parks and transportation for all. The history of Seattle's boulevard system is closely tied to the Olmsted legacy, which left Seattle with a promise of a citywide system of linear landscapes. The idea of connecting people to the remarkably beautiful landscapes and vistas of Seattle predates the Olmsteds, and continues to this day as we evolve to meet the open space needs of future generations, preserving and maintaining design intent, while connecting people to places.

What are our challenges?

Our Seattle network of boulevards were not designed for the vehicle speeds or volumes typically seen today. Early boulevards were designed as slow pleasure drives linking scenic resources for early-model cars on gravel-lined roads. Boulevards today often lack intended connectivity, and higher design speed limits the safe use of boulevards for family-friendly recreational purposes, particularly by people walking or biking.

Seattle, through its Race and Social Justice Initiative, has a goal to eliminate disparities and achieve racial equity. How can we ensure equitable access on our boulevard system (culturally relevant, ADA, multimodal, and geographically distributed) and create a city where park-like qualities blend into our streets, where parks are accessible for people of all incomes, ages and abilities, all while celebrating our history? How can SPR, SDOT, and DON develop shared practices and principles to streamline interdepartmental work on our rich public space inventory? How can we create a transparent process for community involvement?

How did the workshop help address our challenges?

The 2016 Boulevard Workshop sought to work towards design principles, principles of collaboration, and to build the skills and a shared knowledge and understanding of staff and key community stakeholders. Equally important to success -- but not tackled at the workshop -- is the work to clarify the process for DON, SPR and SDOT to collaborate and to standardize involvement of community stakeholders on projects moving forward.

What collaboration principles came out of our workshop?

1. Get the right people around the same table or conference call early!
2. Discuss and identify the problems together before deciding on solutions.
3. Examine a number of different options to resolve issues.

What draft design principles came out of the workshop?

- Work with relevant stakeholders and the public to seek to understand the historic intent, as well as the present needs, challenges and desired user experience to guide future design. Design for people and their needs -- do not design just for cars.
- Replace like with like and strive for consistency and context sensitivity.
- Safety of the public is a moral imperative of the City.

Proposed next steps

1. **Work to more clearly define and map Seattle’s boulevard system.** There is not a consistent or clear definition of boulevards in Seattle among departments, and there is not a comprehensive map of boulevard locations. The City needs to create a map of overlapping boulevards, streets, and designated landmarks to guide collaboration.
2. **Create an Interdepartmental Implementation Team** to finalize the project development process, and agree on a project management flowchart.
3. **Anticipate Future Collaboration Opportunities/Challenges** using the SDOT and DPR workplans to see proactively where proposed projects will overlap with Park property and historic designations.
4. **Test the process** by putting an identified projects through the project management flowchart process early on in project development. Refine the process as needed.
5. **Proactively reclaim space for people** by revisiting the status quo of motor vehicles currently allowed on nearly all boulevards and Park-owned streets. The City should determine locations (for example, Lake Washington Boulevard in Colman Park) where shared street engineering that “treats the car as a guest”, or other slow street modifications, could dramatically improve the park-visitor experience without major disruptions to the transportation system.
6. **Continue conversations between non-governmental stakeholders and the City** to build ties and create a broad coalition of stakeholders who care about boulevards that connect people to and through parks. Invite the Friends of Seattle’s Olmsted Parks and SPR to present to the Seattle Pedestrian Advisory Board and Seattle Bicycle Advisory Board.
7. **Track and celebrate what is working** including the collaborative efforts between SPR and SDOT’s Neighborhood Greenway program. Create a repository of successful collaborative efforts, design details, and projects, such as Cheasty and Lake Washington Boulevard in Washington Park, and Seattle Public Utilities’ CSO projects through Seward Park.



Cheasty Boulevard. Photograph by Seattle Neighborhood Greenways

Section 2.

A Brief History of Seattle's Boulevards

Our boulevards are difficult to define

What exactly is a boulevard in Seattle? Such a straightforward question is not as easy to answer as it might seem.

The Seattle Parks and Recreation department currently does not have an agreed-on definition of the term “boulevard”, although the historic subset of boulevards related to the Olmsted Brothers legacy are more clearly defined in the “Seattle Parks & Recreation Historic Resources Plan.”

To link their planned system of parks, the Olmsted Brothers designed an integrated system of boulevards and scenic roadways. The Olmsted Brothers plan called for two categories of landscaped roadways: boulevards and parkways. The pure distinction between the two was often blurred, and some Seattle roadways contain elements of both boulevard and parkway.

Spatial Organization. Boulevards and parkways were intended to link different parts of the City to parks or scenic resources: For example, Mount Baker Boulevard (a formal boulevard) and Cheasty Boulevard (a naturalistic parkway) connected Beacon Hill to Lake Washington.

Boulevards were to be of a formal design, generally 200- feet wide, and were uniformly-wide for long distances. They generally contained one or more formally planted grass strips and symmetric rows of deciduous trees. Parkway were to provide scenic pleasure drives and were to be more informal in design, located in areas where there was an appreciable amount of natural landscape beauty.

Parkway plantings were informal or naturalistic in design. From preliminary plans, it is clear that the Olmsted Brothers considered the roadway as a sequential experience: They designed framed views, open space, and roadway edges to vary as the motorist progressed.

The Historic Resources Plan document goes on to list 17 historic Boulevards and Parkways. However, this distinction of “parkways” vs. “boulevards” does not seem to carry over into other documents, maps, property agreements or today's GIS maps.

For its part, SDOT primarily defines boulevards in terms of landscaping requirements, breaking boulevards into four classes: Class 1 Boulevard—Natural Landscaping, Class 2 Boulevard—Formal Landscaping, Class 1 Olmsted Boulevard, and Class 2 Olmsted Boulevard. Explanations of these classifications can be found in the maps in Appendix J.

Further complicating matters, placing a map of boulevards as defined by SDOT over a boulevard map from SPR reveals major differences. For instance, SDOT defines Beach Dr SW in West Seattle and Beacon Ave S as boulevards, but these are not included in the SPR map. On the other hand, the SPR map contains boulevards that SDOT doesn't recognize such as 45th Ave W just north of Discovery Park. Adding to the confusion, the maintenance agreement between SPR and SDOT about boulevards (vintage 1984) contains “boulevards” that are not listed in maps provided by either department such as Holyoke Way S and South Horton St.

In seeking to find clarity, we examined the legal definitions in [Appendix I to Title 15](#) of the Seattle Municipal Code (SMC). This section includes “Park Drives” and “Boulevards.” Unfortunately the SMC doesn’t differentiate between Park Drives and Boulevards:

"Park drive or boulevard" means a public place under the jurisdiction of the Department of Parks and Recreation described in Appendix I or shown in the map in Appendix II or a park, administered by the Superintendent.

The definitions in Appendix I and maps in Appendix II of SMC Title 15 indicate that all Park Drives and Boulevards are Parks-owned streets. However, not all of the boulevards and park drives listed in the SMC are included the shapefile maintained by SPR of such assets. For example, Ballard Parkway and Condon Way West are missing from the SPR shapefile. Furthermore, the SPR and SDOT boulevard lists do not reflect current maintenance and operating agreements.



Hunter Boulevard. Photograph by Seattle Neighborhood Greenways

What can we make from all of this confusion over the definition of boulevards?

This report recommends:

- 1) **A clear City-wide definition of boulevard as a concept**, with clear relationships to Olmsted Boulevards, historically landmarked boulevards, parkways, park drives, and Park-owned street right-of-ways. This definition might include the differentiation between park boulevards (those that are owned by SPR) and SDOT boulevards (those that are owned by SDOT). To the general public seeking functional boulevards, the distinction may be confusing.
- 2) **A list and map of where boulevards are located in Seattle**. A note whether a boulevard is historic and falls under Landmarks jurisdiction is also key to note in both legal definitions and on future maps.

Without a clear definition or map, it is challenging to offer a history of boulevards in Seattle. For the purposes of this report we have focused primarily on streets that SPR owns that are meant to connect parks to parks, and people to parks.

A brief historical overview of the the relationship between Seattle boulevards, transportation, and historic preservation

The history of Seattle's boulevard system is closely tied to the Olmsted legacy, but the idea of connecting people to the beautiful landscape of Seattle predates it. Jennifer Ott from Friends of Seattle's Olmsted Parks explains:

the first city-wide plan was developed by Assistant City Engineer George Cotterill in 1897 and 25 miles were developed by 1900. Those bicycle paths often served as the basis for Seattle's boulevards. (see Ott's full remarks in Appendix C)

When the Olmsted company designed Seattle's boulevard system in the early 1900s, boulevards were envisioned as pleasure drives for the newest playthings of Seattle's elite -- their automobiles (<http://crosscut.com/2013/10/seattle-cars-autos/> has an early history of cars in Seattle).



John Charles Olmsted at work.

<http://www.olmsted.org/the-olmsted-legacy/john-charles-olmsted>

These early boulevards were also intended for users of horse-drawn carriages, for people on horseback, walking, and on bicycles. Boulevards were designed to function as a park-like setting where all levels of society could meet and interact in public. In the early 1900s, automobiles were

fundamentally different than the modern vehicles we own today: they were challenging to maneuver, needed more room for wider turns, and were also significantly slower. The slow, cumbersome automobile mixed well with people on foot and on bicycles and horseback. Boulevards were able to function as pleasant places for people and be safe for all modes of transport.

When boulevards were introduced to Seattle, landscape designers considered the needs and safety of all the desired users of a space -- not just the elite pleasure drivers. For instance, writing about Interlaken Boulevard, John Charles Olmsted of the Olmsted Brothers firm wrote of his concerns in 1909:

there has been what seems to me to be a most undesirable omission of a walk paralleling... the drives. My experience in parks elsewhere leaves me without the slightest doubt that is essential for the pleasure and convenience of both drivers and pedestrians.

The widespread adoption of the automobile as a form of everyday transportation later in the twentieth century fundamentally altered the use of the boulevards. Jennifer Ott described this degradation of the original boulevard system:

The boulevards were planned the same year the first car arrived in Seattle, so it is not surprising that they aren't necessarily well-suited to the level of vehicle traffic that often uses them today.

As the popularity of the car grew, particularly after WWII, city planning generally focused more on how to accommodate vehicles on streets, including boulevards. This caused the bicycle and pedestrian experience on some of our boulevards to be seriously degraded.

The ultimate example is SR520 and the off-ramps to the Arboretum, which utilized Lake Washington Boulevard as a "temporary" detour to Madison Street until the RH Thomson Expressway could be built -- a design that has taken more than 60 years to reverse or at least, we hope, to reduce the damage to both the Arboretum and Lake Washington Boulevard. It is also apparent on boulevards where traffic volumes overwhelm adjoining spaces, and Montlake Boulevard, which has lost green space due to lane expansions.

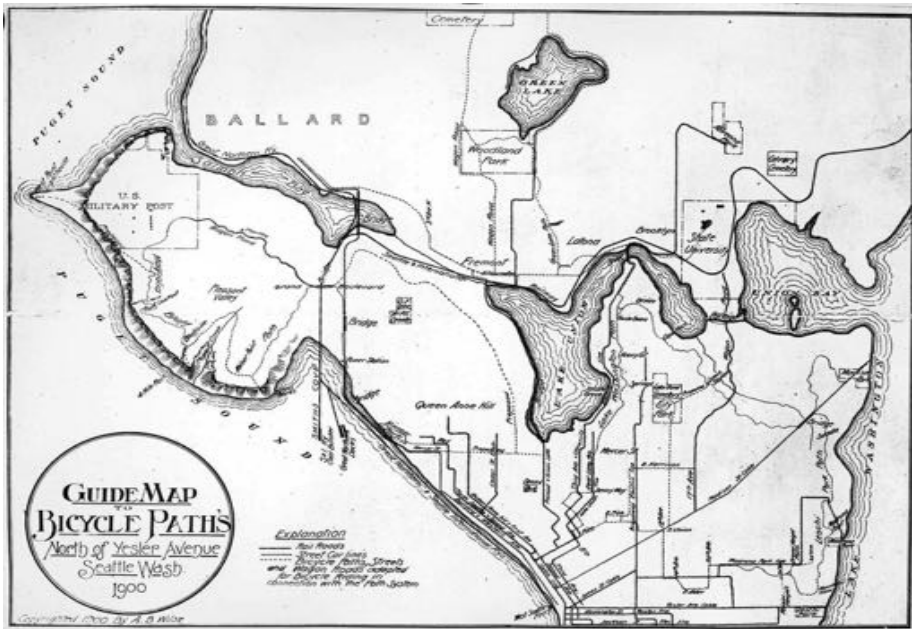
The boulevards serve as linear parks and it is important to recognize their dual function as a transportation route and park.

While boulevards were conceived of as having a dual function of park and transportation route, often times the "dual function" of boulevards became a singular function as cars began to dominate the landscape. The transportation route function began to dominate the historic boulevards as well, at the expense of these special streets being kept as part of Seattle's public park network.

The Seattle Parks and Recreation Department continues to struggle to define when boulevards contribute to open space and when they do not. According to SPR's 2011 Gap Report Update "Boulevards without park amenities e.g. Queen Anne and Montlake boulevards" were not "counted as Usable Open Space."

From the perspective of the diverse public, it is the presence of fast-moving cars that often negates the park-like function of boulevards, while the regulation of vehicles enhances park-like qualities. For instance, East Interlaken Boulevard in Interlaken Park has few park amenities, but

because part of it was closed to everyday vehicles, it has become one of the most loved “park” boulevards in Seattle for people walking, biking, jogging, birdwatching, dog walking, etc.



Local Bicycle Paths 1900 drawn by the photographer A. Wilse

<https://sherrlock.files.wordpress.com/2011/06/map-of-bike-paths-web1.jpg> From an article on Seattle’s early bicycle system described by Paul Dorpat see <https://pauldorpat.com/2011/06/25/seattle-now-then-bikers-choice/>

In the past few decades, historic preservation advocates began to take more notice of the degradation of Seattle’s boulevards. Following a wave of growing awareness of historic preservation in Seattle and around the country, local advocates began to recognize, celebrate, and protect the historic boulevards. Seattle was a founding member of the National Association for Olmsted Parks, and according to FSOP’ Don Harris (see Appendix B for his remarks) Seattle was “recognized for having one of the best preserved Olmsted Park systems outside of New York and Boston.”

The Friends of Seattle’s Olmsted Parks has been instrumental in the work to document and preserve Seattle’s rich legacy of boulevards. The City has also designated some of these boulevards as City Of Seattle Landmarks including Cheasty Boulevard, Queen Anne Parkway (boulevard), and Interlaken Boulevard. Currently, there is no accurate shapefile of these designated landmarks (they are simply points rather than polygons or lines). **We strongly recommend creating a shapefile of all designated landmarks and historic districts in the city of Seattle** that can be overlaid onto SDOT and Parks maps and used for analysis and land use planning.

What is the future of boulevards in Seattle? Seattle’s Parks and Recreation 2011 Development Plan says new boulevards “will be developed in accordance with the Seattle Transportation Strategic Plan, with undesignated boulevard treatment or greening of streets pursued where feasible and desired by local community (and as coordinated with Seattle Transportation).”

The 2016 workshop and report are an attempt to look at the best use of current boulevards and determine how they can function equitably as both parks and transportation for all.

Section 3.

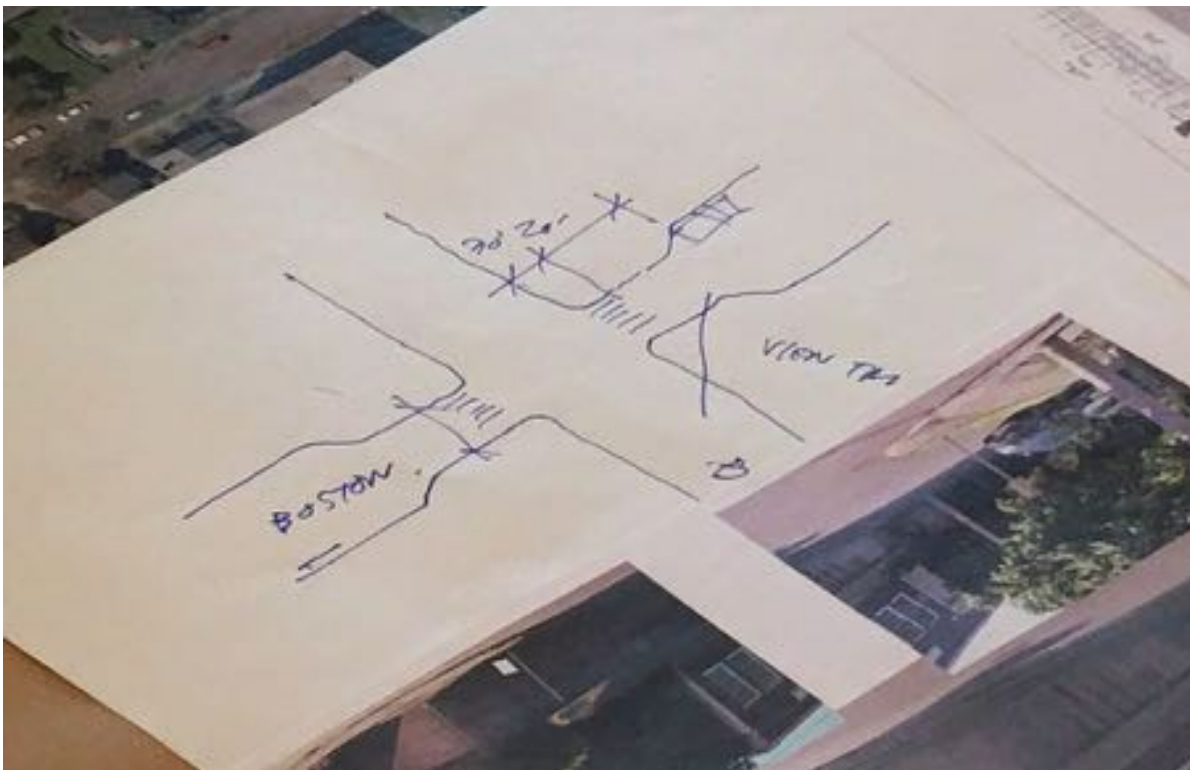
2016 Boulevard Workshop Summary and Findings

The 2016 Boulevard Workshop was held on June 27, 2016 in the Lawn Bowling Clubhouse in historic Jefferson Park on Beacon Hill. The attendees were comprised of experts in landscape architecture, planning, engineering, and representatives of departmental and non-profit stakeholder groups (see appendix H for a list of attendees).

Don Harris (FSOP) and Jennifer Ott (FSOP) gave an overview of Seattle's boulevard history (see appendices B and C). They were followed by representatives of the three City departments that sponsored the workshop: Darby Watson (SDOT), Christopher Williams (SPR), and Erin Dougherty (DON) who gave introductory remarks (see appendices D, E & F).

Cathy Tuttle (SNG) and Gordon Padelford (SNG) introduced the hypothetical design challenges of the day (see appendix I). SNG had assigned attendees to four tables, each carefully constituted to maximize a diversity of expertise and viewpoints. After the first design challenge, each table reported on their discussions, and then repeated the process for a second design challenge.

The Workshop transitioned to a discussion of design and collaboration principles (see appendix G for the original list). These principles are distilled in the following pages.



Principles for collaboration

The high level principles for collaboration that were discussed at the workshop can be summarized as follows.

1. Get the right people, representing diverse interests, around the same table early!
2. Discuss and identify the problems together before deciding on solutions.
3. Examine a number of different options to solve the problem.

Principles for design

The high level principles for design that were discussed at the workshop can be summarized as follows.

- Work with relevant stakeholders and the public to seek to understand the historic intent, as well as the present needs, challenges, and desired user experience to guide the design. Design for people and their needs - not just for cars.
- Consistently replace like with like and strive for consistency and context sensitivity.
- Safety of the public is a moral imperative for all City infrastructure.



Cheasty Boulevard. Photo by Seattle Neighborhood Greenways

City of Seattle departmental design intent

The June 2016 workshop also delved into the principles and design intent for boulevards developed by Seattle Department of Transportation, Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation, and Seattle Department of Neighborhood's Historic Preservation program.

Seattle Department of Transportation review process considerations

Safety is our paramount priority and value.

Seattle Department of Parks and Recreation Design Intent for Parks, Boulevards, and Trails

Design guidelines and landscape [plans](#) to be developed for specific park boulevards or trails should:

1. establish a visual sense or character of public park property;
2. respect the original design intent and historic use of the boulevard system;
3. provide a design continuity discernible to persons using the boulevard or trail for park, recreation, or transportation purposes;
4. allow public use of park boulevards and trails that is appropriate to the size, scale, and capacity of the facility;
5. provide improvements on park boulevards and trails that are compatible with the neighborhood and appropriate for the user community;
6. provide a safe and accessible route for pedestrians. Other non-pedestrian uses, such as bicycles or skates, may be accommodated, if appropriate. Automobile traffic should be restricted to portions of boulevards that are intended to function as street roadways;
7. eliminate and prevent boulevard or trail property from being used for private parking spaces;
8. allow access across park boulevards or trails for driveway, pedestrian walkway, utilities, or other necessary purposes if such access is a legal right of the adjacent property owner and if other access is not available;
9. encourage property owners adjacent to park boulevards to participate in landscape improvement and maintenance, consistent with Department design guidelines and landscape plans;
10. seek to minimize disruption for park boulevard or trail users and neighbors when making changes or improvements that have been determined through a public review process;
11. include visible markers to identify park boulevards or trails.

Definition of Terms:

* **Design Intent** - the long term results to be achieved, encompassing both aesthetic and utilitarian considerations. Design intent will direct or influence decisions about the design, development, improvement, and recreational use of park property.

** **Design Guidelines** - the written descriptions of design features that may be allowed, such as trees, other plantings, walkways, driveways, type of curb, etc. Design guidelines may specify a size, type, color, location, and other relevant specifications for a design feature. Design guidelines may include a range of choices or recommendations.

*** **Landscape Plans** - drawings showing the location and type of elements desired, for the purpose of planning and implementing future improvements.

Seattle Department of Neighborhood's Historic Preservation review process considerations

Proposed alterations – is the property a landmark or located in a historic district?

- Review resources available on Department of Neighborhoods (DON) website; lists and maps
- Contact appropriate landmark or historic district coordinator
- Consult related code sections, guidelines, agreements, and standards

Ownership - if the applicant is not the property owner, contact the owner and collaborate on the proposal. All applications require the property owner's signature for approval.

Potential Briefings - depending on the scale, complexity, or other possible challenges of a proposal, informal briefings to the Architectural Review Committee (ARC) may be beneficial. The goal is to have early input, look at possible alternatives, involve the Board members in the development of the project, and have a level of comfort moving forward with the proposal. The appropriate number of briefings varies depending on the project.

Parallel Reviews - during development of the proposal seek input from stakeholders including adjacent property owners as well as advocates for historic preservation and active transportation that may be required to review and approve the proposal.

Application – Certificate of Approval to be submitted (signed by the Owner), accompanied by the fee, and all of the design / construction documents as outlined on the form.

Staff Review - possible corrections or supplemental information may be requested to make the application complete.

SEPA - if the project requires review under the State Environmental Policy Act, notice of this decision must be issued by Seattle Department of Construction & Inspection (or the responsible agency) before final Board review is scheduled.

Architectural Review Committee – final presentation to determine level of support for the proposal.

Landmarks Preservation Board - final presentation to take action on the proposal.

Certificate of Approval – the documents are processed, accompanied by a letter that is submitted to SDCI. Associated permits may then be issued.

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Proposed Next Steps

- 1. Work to more clearly define and map the boulevard system.** There is not a consistent or clear definition of boulevards in Seattle, and there is not a comprehensive map of boulevard locations. Create a map of overlapping boulevards, streets, and designated landmarks to guide collaboration of all of the City's boulevards.
- 2. Create an Interdepartmental Implementation Team** to finalize the project development process (and flowchart).
- 3. Anticipate Future Collaboration Opportunities/Challenges** by using the SDOT workplan to see where proposed projects overlap with park property and historic designations.
- 4. Test the process** by putting an identified project through the flowchart process early on in the project development. Refine the process as needed based on this first test.
- 5. Proactively reclaim space for people** by revisiting the status quo of motor vehicles being allowed on nearly all Park Department boulevards and park owned streets. Proactively examine whether there are some locations (perhaps such as Lake Washington Boulevard in Colman Park) where limiting motor vehicle speed and access the street would dramatically improve the park visitor experience without major disruptions to the transportation system.
- 6. Continue conversations between non-governmental stakeholders** to build ties and and a broad coalition of stakeholders who care about boulevards and connecting people to and through parks. Invite FSOP and/or SPR to give a presentation to SDOT's Seattle Pedestrian Advisory Board and Seattle Bike Advisory Board.
- 7. Track and celebrate what is working** such as the collaborative efforts between the Seattle Parks and Recreation Department and SDOT's Neighborhood Greenway program. Create a repository of successful collaborative efforts, design details, and projects.



Lake Washington Boulevard Washington Park Arboretum in the snow. Photograph Seattle Neighborhood Greenways