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The U District Partnership Awarded \$1.5M Grant to Explore Lidding I-5, Reconnecting Northeast Seattle Communities

Seattle, WA - **The U District Partnership (UDP)** is thrilled to announce that it has been awarded \$1.5 million as a recipient of the U.S. Department of Transportation's [Reconnecting Communities Pilot \(RCP\) Program](#). The funding will allow The U District Partnership and the Lid I-5 North Coalition to explore the feasibility of lidding Interstate 5 between NE 45th and 50th Streets in Northeast Seattle.

For over half a century, the neighborhoods of Wallingford, the U District, Ravenna, and Roosevelt have all been bifurcated and separated by major federal highway infrastructure. The Lid I-5 North feasibility study will look at ways to re-knit these communities together, while providing important additional assets like affordable housing, open space, and better inter-community access for people walking, biking, and otherwise rolling.

"It's time to be bold and write Seattle's next chapter where our communities are not disconnected by acres of highway," said **Don Blakeney, Executive Director of The U District Partnership and Member of the Lid I-5 North Coalition**. *"In many ways, this grant gives us an opportunity to peer into the future to imagine something totally new that could change the way people access and experience Northeast Seattle. We are grateful to the U.S. Department of Transportation along with Senator Patty Murray and our federal delegation for their leadership and vision for how investments in infrastructure can positively impact our communities."*

Led by UDP and the Lid I-5 North Coalition, the project will conduct an engineering and programmatic feasibility study, in addition to a community visioning process that investigates ways to reconnect Northeast Seattle neighborhoods. This is the second Reconnecting Communities grant to be awarded to a Seattle project—the first of which was the Lid I-5 project in downtown Seattle.

"We worked hard to pass the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law because we knew how much of a difference this historic investment in our nation's infrastructure would make in Washington state—and today, thanks to that law, we're seeing hundreds of local projects newly underway, upgrading our roads, ports, and transit systems, and better connecting our communities," said **U.S. Senator Patty Murray**.

The U District Partnership's **Reclaiming Space, Restoring Communities: A Lid Study for Northeast Seattle** project is one of four in Washington State to receive this year's funding. Other funded projects in Washington include Spokane Transit Authority's **Division Street Bus Rapid Transit** project (\$2M), the City of Vancouver's **Construction of Community Connector Lid over Interstate 5** (\$30M), and the Hoh Tribe project to **Improve Connectivity and Safety in the Hoh Highlands** (\$216,000) which are bisected by Highway 101.

"With this award, the communities in Wallingford, Roosevelt, and the University District will map out a new park over I-5. This community-led project will envision ways to connect the neighborhoods with the potential to add new green space, build affordable housing, and reduce noise and air pollution from the Interstate," **U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell** said.

*"Highways that run through neighborhoods restrict economic opportunities, limit green space, and create barriers between our communities and businesses," said **U.S. Representative Pramilla Jayapal**. "I'm pleased to see this crucial project receive the funding necessary to take steps to envision reconnecting the University District and Wallingford, as well as making our streets safer and reducing pollution. For decades, I-5 has divided our communities, and I'm proud to have worked to pass the Infrastructure Law which will bring this important funding home."*

*"This \$1.5 million federal grant will allow Seattle to explore how we can reconnect the University District, Wallingford, and Roosevelt neighborhoods. This is the kind of big thinking needed to reimagine our city, improve transportation, foster equitable development, and bring communities together, and will supplement \$500,000 in the voter approved levy to study lidding I-5," said **Seattle Mayor Bruce Harrell**. "Thank you to Senators Patty Murray and Maria Cantwell and our entire delegation for championing projects that invest in Seattle's future."*

*"We are thrilled to see the Federal government invest in another Seattle community who is trying to reverse the impacts of highway infrastructure," says **Scott Bonjukian, Co-Chair of the Lid I-5 Coalition**. "Our coalition has been fighting to reconnect Downtown Seattle to First Hill and Capitol Hill and we also secured this type of grant for the City of Seattle last year to advance our planning efforts in the center city. We are proud to be working with many community organizations across Seattle aiming to improve neighborhoods that have been bifurcated by highway infrastructure. We look forward to strong partnerships with the City's leadership to move these projects forward."*

*"This grant offers a tremendous opportunity to explore new ways to address the growing needs of the U District," says **Aaron Hoard, Director of Regional & Community Relations at the University of Washington**. "With the recent increase of zoning capacity and the expansion of light rail, we are now one of the fastest-growing communities in America. A lid holds the promise of bringing much needed open spaces, market-rate and affordable housing, not to mention, improved walking and biking connections between our neighboring communities."*

A New Nexus of Density and Diversity

The U District is one of the densest (30,000 people per square mile¹) and fastest growing neighborhoods in Seattle. In response to the upzone in 2017, the U District has seen permits come in for over 20 new tower developments, five of which have recently come online. New investments in light rail and bus infrastructure are aiming to serve the growing population affiliated with the University of Washington, which has over 50,000 students and 30,000 employees. As an urban center of Northeast Seattle, the U District neighborhood serves a diverse population of residents across age, race, and household income demographics. Additionally, the U District is home to one of Seattle's most diverse small business communities where the majority of businesses are owned by women or people of color.

A Lack of Affordable Housing and Open Space

After the upzone of the U District, land values increased, making affordable housing development increasingly difficult to finance. A lid over Interstate 5 offers a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to expand available land for such development. Additionally, the U District currently has less than 5 acres of park space per 1,000 residents, falling well below the recommended city standard of 9 acres.² This is further exacerbated by the growing residential population. The 14-acre space available is nearly 1/5th the size of Seattle Center and could link the

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey (ACS) Population Density Data. Detailed neighborhood profiles for the University District and surrounding areas.

² Seattle Parks and Recreation's Parks and Open Space Gap Report, which assesses open space availability per capita in various Seattle neighborhoods.

dense business districts of Wallingford and the University District with a variety of amenities like open space, housing and better walking and biking connections.

Building on Community Momentum

In November of 2023, The U District Partnership and the Lid I-5 North Steering Committee held a [community vision workshop](#) that offered an initial conversation with the broader community to hear presentations and explore student-led design stations that fostered discussion and visioning of the potential space. Ideas from the workshop ranged from using the land for housing, open space, pollution mitigation, and safer bicycle and pedestrian connections. The feasibility study will support more community visioning, in addition to assessing both the existing conditions and technical considerations for building a lid over the existing freeway as part of an overall rehabilitation of I-5.

The Interstate Divide: A Fracture in Transportation and Human History

The 1956 Federal-Aid Highway Act, under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, authorized the construction of the Interstate Highway System. Interstate 5 was federally funded under this program starting in 1957 with the first cars going through in 1967 ([Source: Seattle Times](#)) and the final segment completed in 1969 ([Source: History Link](#)). The Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program addresses the adverse effects of highway systems by building on decades of activism and grassroots organizing to address the repercussions of previous transportation infrastructure decisions ([Source: Department of Transportation](#)).

Seattle has a history of thinking creatively against the challenges of the Interstate that carves its way through the center of the city. As the I-5 segment of Seattle was completed, community members were already discussing the potential for a lid; resulting in Seattle's renowned Freeway Park becoming the first park in the world to be built atop a freeway. Freeway lids in Mount Baker and Mercer Island are also notable examples.

About The Lid I-5 North Coalition

Building on the success of previous lid projects, Lid I-5 North was formed in 2022 as a community-led initiative to reconnect the neighborhoods of the U District, Wallingford, Ravenna, and Roosevelt through a highway lid over Interstate 5 between NE 45th and NE 50th Streets. The current Lid I-5 North Coalition is a group of residents, property owners, business owners, and other stakeholders from the surrounding neighborhoods that converge at the proposed project area. For more information, visit lidi5north.org.

About The U District Partnership

The U District Partnership is the voice for Seattle's University District neighborhood, improving and promoting its vibrancy through advocacy, public safety, cleaning, economic development, placemaking, events, marketing, and social services. Through its programs, The U District Partnership enhances the vibrancy of the U District while addressing the community's diverse needs. For more information, visit udistrictpartnership.org.

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Grant announcement page:

<https://www.transportation.gov/grants/reconnecting/rcp-fy24-awards>