The Alaskan Way Viaduct is a double-deck, elevated section of State Route 99 that has been synonymous with the downtown Seattle waterfront since the early 1950s. From the highway, drivers have a birds-eye view of the many components that contribute to Seattle’s character - the skyscraper skyline, Elliott Bay, Port of Seattle operations, the railroad, sports stadiums and tourist attractions, and in the distance, the Olympic Mountains. From the ground-level, pedestrians hear the constant hum of cars and see the large concrete barrier that separates downtown from the waterfront.

The viaduct and Battery Street Tunnel were built to provide a bypass route through downtown Seattle, connecting the industrial areas to the south with neighborhoods in north and northwest Seattle. Despite the viaduct’s effectiveness as a transportation artery, decades of wear and tear have taken a toll on the structure, and the 2001 Nisqually earthquake also caused damage. The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), in partnership with the Federal Highway Administration, King County, City of Seattle and the Port of Seattle, is leading the program to replace the structure. Construction is underway to replace the southern mile of the viaduct, between S. Holgate and S. King streets, with a new side-by-side roadway. This section will be demolished in 2012, and the roadway will be complete in late 2013.

The preferred alternative for replacing the viaduct’s central waterfront section, between S. King Street and Battery Street, is a bored tunnel beneath downtown. The tunnel is proposed to open to drivers in late 2015, and the remaining half of the viaduct would be demolished in 2016.
The 2.1-mile Alaskan Way Viaduct was built in phases between 1949 and 1959, with completion of the Battery Street Tunnel in 1954. Building the highway in phases minimized disruptions and allowed time to secure additional funding.

Battery Street to Pike Street, 1949-1951
The construction contract was awarded to McRae Brothers in December 1949 and was completed in July 1951. This section is among the tightest along the entire route, with several buildings, including some of Seattle’s oldest, located very close to the structure.

Pike Street to S. King Street, 1951-1952
This project continued construction from Pike Street to the south. Morrison-Knudsen Company, Inc. completed the work - including the pedestrian overpass to Colman Dock and turnouts for potential future ramps - ahead of schedule in August 1952.

S. King Street to Railroad Way S., 1951-1953
The contract for the section of viaduct from S. King Street to Railroad Way S. was awarded to McRae Brothers. When work was finally completed in April 1953, the entire section of the viaduct from Battery Street to Railroad Way S. was opened to traffic.
While the first sections of the viaduct were designed by the City of Seattle Engineering Department, this section was designed by the Bridge Division of the State Department of Highways. The two ramps at the south end of this section were important because they served as the terminus of the project until the connection to S. Spokane Street was completed in 1959.

Battery Street Tunnel (Subway), 1951-1954
The Battery Street Tunnel was the vital “missing link” to connect the new waterfront structure with Aurora Avenue N. The construction contract was awarded to Morrison-Knudsen Company, Inc., and Rumsey and Company, with work starting in September 1952 and ending in 1954. The depressed roadway, or subway, section was 2,134 feet long. The tunnel was designed by the Seattle Engineering Department, and it was the first tunnel they had designed and built.

Viaduct extension and ramps, 1955-1966
Initially, the viaduct ended with a stub at Railroad Way S. A short, 0.2-mile extension segment was completed in 1956 by Rumsey and Company. The contract for the final stretch, to S. Holgate Street, was awarded to the Morrison-Knudsen Company and Rumsey and Company in June 1956. Work was completed and the new roadway, which ultimately connected State Route 99 to S. Spokane Street, opened in 1959. Initially, four ramps were proposed at Seneca, Spring, Columbia and Union streets. In the end, two were built. The Seneca Street off-ramp was completed in October 1961, and the Columbia Street on-ramp was opened in 1966.
To recognize the significance of the viaduct, which has served the Puget Sound region and Seattle for more than 50 years, WSDOT and the Federal Highway Administration created a website with photos and historical information about the structure and nearby neighborhoods. Learn more at www.viaducthistory.org.

Aerial view of Battery Street Tunnel northbound entrance.

The Empire Laundry Building (now Bell Lofts condominium) has a corner that juts into the railing.

Underside of on- and off-ramps connecting to First Avenue S. These ramps were realigned in 2011.

Two distinctive sign bridges were designed by the Seattle Engineering Department and were cast locally by Pacific Car and Foundry.

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Washington State
Department of Transportation

U.S. Department of Transportation
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