



Whatcom Chapter

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Comments of the I-5 Fairhaven to Slater Road Master Plan

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Futurewise Whatcom is a local chapter of the statewide smart growth advocacy group, Futurewise. Futurewise works toward better public policies and planning to support livable communities for today and tomorrow. Futurewise encourages state and local governments to carry out the spirit and intent of the Washington State Growth Management Act by discouraging urban sprawl into valuable rural resource lands. One component of this work includes smart alternatives to single occupancy vehicles.

An Awkward Legacy

Interstate 5 has had an awkward relationship with Bellingham from the start. Cutting through established neighborhoods, the design of the I-5 was compromised by site restrictions. Most notably, most of the on and off ramps were dangerously short, often with compromised lines of sight. In recent years increased traffic has added to this problem, even as redesign changes have ameliorated some of the worst problems.

Futurewise supports efforts to improve deficient on and off ramps for the I-5 corridor from Fairhaven to Slater Road. At the same time, we are opposed to widening the highway beyond what is needed to provide safe merging lanes. Practically speaking, through Bellingham this means an absolute limit of three vehicle lanes in each direction.

It should be noted that two lanes in each direction is more than sufficient for all personal and commercial traffic into and out of Bellingham, going north and south. In other words, mainline highway expansion cannot be justified on the assertion that it is needed for regional connectivity. Moreover, it would be unwise to build for future peak mainline capacity, assuming steady growth, but not assuming that travel times would respond to urban peak traffic conditions. To do so would overlook the fundamental elasticity and flexibility of vehicle travel, and would disregard the long-range effects of increasing fuel costs and the changes that this will bring.

This Far and No Further

In simplest terms, we oppose highway expansion because, rather than solving congestion and increasing accessibility, it encourages and contributes to greater traffic problems. This erodes our quality of live and contributes to a wasteful and ultimately unsustainable way of doing business.

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Futurewise Whatcom believes that transportation infrastructure should benefit the quality of life for Whatcom County's residents. Ironically, beyond a certain point, increased motor vehicle traffic materially erodes livability, provides decreasing incremental gains for transportation dependent commerce, and displaces or marginalizes alternative forms of transportation.

Vehicle travel is notoriously elastic. Studies have shown that traffic volume readily expands to fill new capacity. Rather than relieving congestion, expanded highway capacity encourages greater motor vehicle use that can obviate any gains in capacity. This paradoxical and counterproductive result is especially likely in the case of an urban highway that passes through a city, where the highway serves as a de facto urban arterial. In addition, the increased intra-city traffic made possible by a wider highway can exacerbate rather than relieve congestion in arterial and interchanges that connect to the highway.

The paradoxical result is found in all aspects of travel. What is true for congestion is also true for travel distance and accessibility. The common expectation is that expanded highways will increase accessibility, when in fact urban highway expansion tends to stimulate more dispersed development that reduces, rather than increases, accessibility. Similarly, some have suggested that expansion reduces fuel consumption, pollution emissions and accidents, but this is true only if one measures impacts per vehicle-mile and ignores the increased vehicle miles. The per-mile impact may be less, but the overall impact is greater, due to the overall increase in motor vehicle usage.

Moreover, highway expansion may be a poor use of resources.* While the initial benefits of interstate and inter-regional highway routes have been enormous, expansion of existing highway capacity returns very little additional benefit in exchange for enormous investment of limited public resources. Highway expansion is very costly, particularly in urban areas; yet the true costs of congestion are relatively minor compared to the significant costs of vehicle operation and of parking. In other words, a car-based transportation system has enormous total expenses borne by individuals and society, so that encouraging such a system actually places a heavy burden on society. For example, dispersed, sprawling development places a greater infrastructure burden on local governments, increasing taxes for local citizens. Facilitating car usage by relieving congestion solves a minor problem at the expense of worsening major problems.

We suggest that ramp metering be considered as relatively cheap and effective means to relieve on ramp congestion, in those areas where this may become a problem as traffic volume increases. At present, there are no areas that would seem to require even this kind of improvement.

To summarize, expansion of an urban highway has enormous costs but returns minimal or negative benefits in terms of highway traffic flow/congestion, accessibility and travel time, and in traffic flow in connected non-highway streets and intersections.

* States spend an average of \$0.87 of federal funds per person on pedestrian facilities, compared to \$50 on roads and bridges.

Planning for Sprawl

In justifying the need to expand the mainline capacity of I-5 in Whatcom County, the Washington State DOT has claimed that “Land use changes adopted by local governments within Whatcom County will significantly increase the demand for travel on the Interstate.” We respectfully disagree. In accordance with the Growth Management Act, the local governments of Whatcom County are trying to contain and prevent sprawl. Mainline highway expansion will actually thwart these local planning efforts.

One general solution to traffic problems is to establish alternative routes or means of travel – such as the beneficial redundancy built into a grid system, or the choice of alternative modes of transportation (mass transit, rail, bicycle, pedestrian). The one response that we know does not provide lasting success – building greater capacity – is the one choice we should avoid if at all possible. As local governments take up the serious and difficult task of smarter and more sustainable land use practices, it would be tragic and wasteful if State efforts actually worked counter to these efforts.

Recommendations

Two vehicle lanes are adequate for traffic into and out of Bellingham; more lanes within city limits primarily serves intra-city traffic. Mainline highway expansion should be indefinitely deferred. All emphasis should be placed on improving the safety of on and off ramps, which may include the addition of a merging lane, and not on highway expansion per se.

We suggest the following:

- Prioritize public safety by devoting resources towards improving on and off ramps, rather than towards adding additional through lanes or mainline capacity.
- Consider ramp metering in the future, when traffic volume merits.
- Re-focus transportation dollars on alternative forms of transportation, including mass transit, rail, walking and bicycling.
- Facilitate commerce by emphasis on truck routes to/from the highway
- Discourage the use of the Interstate as a municipal arterial.
- Explore possibility of non-highway routes to provide alternate routes and beneficial redundancy.
- Facilitate greater use of rail systems, for cargo as well as passenger travel.

Thank you for considering our comments. Please direct any question to Eric Hirst (656-6690) or Michael Lilliquist (392-8678)