

---

# WashPIRG's Transportation Accountability Campaign

---

## Breaking the Political Gridlock: What Will Washington's Next Governor Do About Transportation?

Issue briefing by Jessyn Schor

---

*For More Information:*



Washington Public Interest Research Group  
3240 Eastlake Avenue East • Suite 100 • Seattle, WA 98102  
(206) 568-2850 (ph) • <http://www.washpirg.org>

## Executive Summary

---

### Breaking the Political Gridlock: What Will Washington's Next Governor Do About Transportation?

**C**ongestion, air pollution, and a crumbling infrastructure continue to threaten Washingtonians' health, safety, and quality of life.

Our next governor will have the opportunity to address these critical problems by promoting transportation policies that move people and goods efficiently, prioritize safety and maintenance, and protect public health and the environment.

After years of political gridlock at the state and local level, it is clear that our next governor must take the lead on transportation issues.

With the 2004 election drawing near, Washington voters deserve to know how each gubernatorial candidate plans to tackle congestion, air pollution, and the replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct.

WashPIRG proposes that these problems can be addressed in the near-term by:

- **Expanding the Commute Trip Reduction Program** in 2005 by securing an additional \$1.5 million so that more people can take advantage of employer-subsidized bus passes and vanpools.
- **Saving passenger-only ferry service** by securing \$3 million in the 2005-2007 biennial budget.
- **Supporting Sound Transit's Phase 2 ballot measure** to expand high capacity transit in the Puget Sound region.
- **Developing a plan in 2005 to replace the Alaskan Way Viaduct** that sets forth the state's financial share.

We urge each candidate to support concrete steps to protect our environment and quality of life. Washington residents deserve no less.

## **I. The Problems: Congestion, Air Pollution and Crumbling Infrastructure**

We are all too familiar with the problems associated with our state's failing transportation system. We still spend too much time in traffic congestion because we have no good alternatives to our cars. Our bridges and highways are in need of repair. Air pollution caused by cars and trucks continues to degrade our health and environment. Too many roads are designed to move cars at high speeds, with little regard for pedestrian safety or neighborhood cohesion. Biking and walking in many communities simply is not safe. For those who do not drive, transit options are limited and inconvenient. Throw into the mix entrenched interests in highway expansion and an anti-tax lobby that has successfully slashed transit funding, and you have a transportation status quo that fails at its most basic purpose – to move goods and people efficiently.

That our transportation system no longer works efficiently should come as no surprise. Washington's population increased by over 1 million people between 1990 and 2000. While most of this growth occurred in the Puget Sound area, other towns and cities also experienced rapid growth. Vancouver's population swelled by 80%, from 192,227 people to 345,238 from 1990 to 2000, and Spokane added almost 60,000 people, an 11% increase. With Washington's population expected to increase by over 1 million people in the next twenty years, three problems in particular need our urgent attention: congestion, air pollution caused by cars and trucks, and preservation of aging highway infrastructure.

### **1. Congestion: harming our quality of life and economic productivity**

The Puget Sound region is one of the most congested areas in the country and the economic costs of congestion are great. According to the Texas Transportation

Institute's (TTI) 2003 Urban Mobility Report, traffic congestion is estimated to cost the Puget Sound Region \$844 million annually, or \$465 per person each year in wasted time and fuel.

Traffic congestion is not just a Puget Sound problem. In the Portland-Vancouver area, a recent bi-state task force estimated that the value of truck-delay alone due to congestion was approximately \$14.1 million in 2000. In 2003 TTI estimated that congestion cost the Portland-Vancouver area \$757 million per year. Even in a small urban area like Spokane, congestion has negative effects. According to TTI's 2003 report, Spokane congestion cost businesses and individuals approximately \$30 million a year.

The percentage of congested roadway network in Puget Sound is expected to stay more or less the same, even if the \$100 billion dollars of investments in the region's Metropolitan Transportation Plan are made. In 1998 4.51% of the network was congested during morning peak hours and 8.93% was congested during evening peak hours. At full-build out in 2030, 4.87% of the network in the morning and 11.09% in the evening will be congested. In Clark County, conservative estimates project that congestion will get worse, even if all the projects in the Metropolitan Transportation Plan are built. In 2000, 45 miles in the road network experienced congestion, but by 2025, 114 miles are expected to be congested.

## **2. Air quality at risk:**

As might be expected, our transportation system also wreaks havoc on our air quality, with automobiles producing over half of Washington's air pollution. Cars, trucks and buses emit 76% of nitrogen oxide and 57% of volatile organic compounds in the Puget Sound Region. These two compounds combine to create ozone, which exacerbates a number of respiratory diseases and is especially harmful to people with

asthma. In King County almost 10% of children and 7% of adults suffer from asthma, caused in part by vehicle pollution. Indeed, over the last ten years, childhood hospitalization rates for asthma have increased by 53% (from 505 children a year to 772), even as overall childhood hospitalization rates have decreased.

In spite of these negative effects on our health and environment, Washington residents are driving more than ever. The number of vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by Washington residents increased dramatically in the last twenty years. In 2000, Washingtonians drove 53.3 billion miles, up from 31.3 billion miles in 1982, an increase of 71%. While some of this increase can be attributed to population growth, data show that individuals are driving more, too. In 1982 Washington residents drove 7,300 miles a year per person. By 2000, that number had increased 24% to 9,000 miles per year per person. The result? Metropolitan Seattle barely complies with the federal Clean Air act in the case of ozone, and King County was given an F in the American Lung Association's 2004 "State of the Air" report for the amount of particulate matter in the air.

As it stands now, the strategy used in most metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) to maintain air quality – aggressive increases in transit ridership over the next 20 to 30 years – is simply not viable without a major policy shift because projected reliance on transit grossly exceeds current capacity and the funding commitments for future capacity. The Puget Sound Regional Council's (PSRC) 2030 plan, for instance, projects that transit ridership in the Puget Sound Region during the morning peak hour will increase from 161,000 in 2003 to 418,000 in 2030 – 2 ½ times what it is now. The PSRC also estimates that bus service must increase by 80% in the next 25 years to meet federal and state air quality standards.

This expectation is not specific to Puget Sound: both the Spokane and Clark County MTP's rely on significant increases in transit use to maintain air quality as well. The Spokane Regional Transportation Council anticipates that at full implementation of

its MTP, transit ridership will have increased from 29,000 in 2003 to 75,000 riders during peak hour, an increase of 39%. In Clark County, even though C-TRAN lost 40% of its funding with the passage of I-695, the Clark County MTP anticipates a 30% increase in transit ridership over the next 20 years. While these ridership increases are significant, they are not unrealistic if we are truly committed to building enough new transit capacity to make such increases possible. If we are serious about improving our air quality (especially if we continue to rely on fossil fuels), we must achieve these transit ridership goals.

### **3. Aging Infrastructure: The Alaskan Way Viaduct**

A significant portion of the state transportation budget is dedicated to the preservation and maintenance of the Washington's State's 80,000 mile roadway system. In the 2001-2003 biennium, 22% of the capital budget and 24% of the operating budget was allocated to highway preservation. Even with these significant investments, according to a 2003 Surface Transportation Policy Project report, 46.9% of Washington's roads are in poor repair. When considering that for every dollar not spent on timely preventative maintenance, \$4-8 dollars will be needed for complete reconstruction a few years later, in an era of scarce transportation funding, preservation and maintenance projects must be the top priority for state highway dollars.

Large replacement projects also compete for scarce funding. Despite the fact that the Alaskan Way Viaduct and supporting seawall were damaged severely in the 2001 Nisqually earthquake, for instance, there is no commitment from the state to come up with the \$3-4 billion dollars needed to replace it. The Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT) predicts that the viaduct would not withstand another earthquake the magnitude of the Nisqually. This is especially disconcerting given that 110,00 vehicles – or 20-25% of all downtown traffic – use the Alaskan Way Viaduct every day.

## **II. Solutions:**

After years of political gridlock at the state level, we must elect a governor who will put Washington on a path toward a new transportation policy – one that is better for commuters, our environment, and our communities. Because transportation is such a big issue in this year's election, and because voters deserve to know how each candidate proposes to improve transportation, WashPIRG is approaching Chris Gregoire, Ron Sims and Dino Rossi and asking each to support a transportation program that will improve mobility, preserve air quality, and prioritize safety. We propose accomplishing this through three pragmatic strategies:

- Improving highway system efficiency
- Expanding transit service
- Making replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct the state's number one highway infrastructure priority.

### **1. Highway System Efficiency:**

We can improve mobility and maintain air quality at a relatively low cost by using our highway system more efficiently – in other words, moving more people and goods in fewer vehicles. A number of strategies can be used, but Washington state's innovative Commute Trip Reduction Program (CTR Program) has successfully reduced drive-alone commuting through employer-based incentives, such as subsidized bus passes and vanpools.

The Commute Trip Reduction program is cost effective. In 2002 state and local jurisdictions spent about \$5 million dollars, leveraged \$36 million dollars from employers, and realized a value of approximately \$40 million dollars in saved time and money from reduced delay and fuel costs. The CTR program also relieves congestion. Those participating in the program reduced weekday morning commute trips in 2003 by 19,000,

or 1.0% of the peak morning trips in the region. The PSRC estimates that if these vehicle trips were added back onto the regional roadways, delay would increase by 6.3% or by 719,000 hours annually.

Congestion, especially in the Puget Sound region, is a drain on our economic vitality and quality of life but the traditional solution, highway expansion, is a costly, disruptive, and short-term panacea at best. In areas like Puget Sound, which is expected to absorb another 1 million people in the next 25 years, we must find a better way to move people and goods, efficiently and safely. Let us instead invest in programs like CTR that encourage people to take transit, vanpool and carpool, and make Washington a leader in highway system efficiency as we have been with recycling and waste management.

## **2. Transit:**

A second strategy for maintaining air quality and improving mobility is to increase transit service and capacity by supporting local transit initiatives and continuing to fund transit at the state level. To comply with state and federal air quality standards, many county and regional transit agencies have set forth robust transit ridership goals in their MTPs. For example, Everett Transit projects that its ridership will increase from 1,513,054 in 2002 to 2,130,000 in 2009. Pierce Transit projects that its ridership will increase from 12,978,585 in 2002 to 13,710,000 in 2009. Sound Transit expects its Sounder commuter rail service to carry 2,800,000 passengers by 2009, up from its current 817,405. Even C-TRAN, which has experienced severe cutbacks in funding expects its service to increase by 1.5% each year through 2009. To help urban areas preserve their air quality, it is vital that our next governor support the expansion of transit capacity through state and local funding.

In the next couple of years, Sound Transit will put a ballot initiative to Puget Sound voters to expand high capacity transit to East King County, Pierce County and

Snohomish County. This fall, C-TRAN is running a ballot initiative to expand transit service in Clark County. While the governor does not take a direct role in transit initiatives, because these initiatives are the primary mechanism for financing new transit capacity and service, and because better and more transit service is so important for commuters and for preserving our air quality, we need the next governor to use his or her influence to ensure that these initiatives pass.

### **3. Safety and Maintenance:**

Third, we must take care of Washington's 80,000 miles of existing highways. In particular, the next governor must make the replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct the state's number one infrastructure priority. WSDOT's draft EIS estimates that it will cost approximately \$3-4 billion dollars to replace the viaduct and seawall, depending on which design is chosen. While the Puget Sound region and the federal government will likely pay for part of the replacement, the Alaskan Way Viaduct is a state road, and the state must take responsibility for a substantial portion of the bill.

It is not enough, however, to rebuild the viaduct. We have the opportunity to replace the viaduct with a structure that improves mobility, enhances Seattle's waterfront, and minimizes harm to the environment. State funding needs to be secured, but we must also replace the viaduct with a structure that incorporates the very best principles of design and environmental protection. The governor is in a unique position, as the highest elected official in the state, to bring together local, state and federal stakeholders to develop a financial plan for the replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct.

## **III. The Policies**

Washington residents deserve a transportation system that is safe, efficient, and preserves our environment and quality of life. We can accomplish this by implementing policies that improve highway system efficiency, expand transit service and capacity, and prioritize the replacement of the Alaskan Way Viaduct. In light of a tight state transportation budget, limited citizen appetite for raising taxes, and a divided state legislature, the following policies are specific steps that the next governor can take in the near term to move Washington forward.

**1. Get the most out of our existing highways: Expand the Commute Trip Reduction Program**

- Secure an additional \$1.5 million dollars to expand the Commute Trip Reduction Program in 2005-2007 biennial transportation budget.

**2. Increase transit capacity and service: support local transportation initiatives, and continue to fund transit at the state level.**

- Save passenger-only ferry service from Vashon Island to Seattle by securing \$3 million in the 2005-2007 biennial transportation budget.
- In 2005 support Sound Transit's Phase 2 ballot measure to expand high capacity transit in the Puget Sound region.

**3. Take care of existing infrastructure: Fix the Alaskan Way Viaduct**

- In 2005 commit to replacing the Alaskan Way Viaduct and develop a plan that sets forth the state's financial share.

**IV. Conclusion**

In spite of the negative effects of our transportation policies on our economy, environment, and quality of life, there is some good news. A WSDOT poll conducted in fall 2003 poll suggests that voters in Puget Sound care deeply about fixing the Alaskan Way Viaduct and improving mobility by increasing transit service and capacity. As well, Washington residents around the state continue to support transit. Voters in Spokane recently approved by 69% a sales tax increase of 3/10ths of a percent to improve local

transit service, and in the Puget Sound region, Sounder ridership from Tacoma to Seattle continues to exceed expectations.

These small improvements aside, we cannot build the same transportation system in the next 50 years as we built in the last 50. Environmental protection, safety, and efficiency must be the building blocks of any new transportation program. With the 2004 election only a few months away, gubernatorial candidates should tell voters how they plan to improve mobility, protect our air quality, and maintain our highways. A good place to start would be by expanding the Commute Trip Reduction Program, increasing transit capacity by supporting Sound Transit's Phase 2 ballot initiative, funding passenger-only ferry service, and developing a plan to fix the Alaskan Way Viaduct.

Sources:

Puget Sound Regional Council, *Puget Sound Metropolitan Transportation Plan Final Environmental Impact statement*, May 3, 2001, [http://www.psrc.org/datapubs/pubs/publist/publist\\_mtp.htm](http://www.psrc.org/datapubs/pubs/publist/publist_mtp.htm).

Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council, *Metropolitan Transportation Plan Final Environmental Impact Statement*, December 2002, <http://www.rtc.wa.gov/reports/mtp>.

Spokane Regional Transportation Council, *Metropolitan Transportation Plan*, July 2003, <http://www.srtc.org/pdffiles/MTP%20Approved%207-03.pdf>.

Texas Transportation Institute, *2003 Urban Mobility Report*, September 2003, [http://mobility.tamu.edu/ums/mobility\\_data/west\\_map.stm](http://mobility.tamu.edu/ums/mobility_data/west_map.stm).

Roadway network congestion figures taken from Puget Sound's MTP FEIS and Vancouver's MTP FEIS.

Surface Transportation Policy Project, *Clearing the Air*, August 2003, <http://www.transact.org/report.asp?id=227>.

American Lung Association, *State of the Air: 2004*, April 2004, [http://lungaction.org/reports/sota04\\_county.html?fcc=53033](http://lungaction.org/reports/sota04_county.html?fcc=53033)

Washington Public Interest Research Group, *More Roads, More Traffic: Why Highway Construction Won't Solve Traffic Congestion In Washington*, July 2003, <http://washpirg.org/WA.asp?id2=10304&id3=WA&>.

Washington State Department of Transportation, *Summary of Public Transportation – 2002*, December 2003, [www.wsdot.wa.gov/transit](http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/transit).

Surface Transportation Policy Project, *The State of Our Nation's Roads Report*, January 2003, <http://www.transact.org/library/roadconditiondecoder.asp>

Washington State Department of Transportation, *Key Facts: A Summary of Transportation Information for Washington State 2002*, 2002, [www.wsdot.wa.gov/Keyfacts](http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Keyfacts)

Washington State Department of Transportation, *Alaskan Way Viaduct Draft Environmental Impact Statement*, March 2004, <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/projects/viaduct/deis/>

Commute Trip Reduction Task Force, *2003 Report to the Washington State Legislature*, [http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/tdm/tripreduction/download/CTR\\_Report\\_03.pdf](http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/tdm/tripreduction/download/CTR_Report_03.pdf)