

PUBLIC TESTIMONY SUMMARY

I-900 STATE AUDITOR'S PERFORMANCE AUDIT:

Washington State Department of Transportation Managing and Reducing Congestion in Puget Sound (10/10/2007)

As Heard by the Joint Legislative Audit & Review Sub-Committee on I-900 Performance Audits
on October 22, 2007

The performance audit being discussed at this hearing was conducted solely and independently by the office of the State Auditor, under the authority of legislation approved by the voters in Initiative 900. The State Auditor is elected directly by the people of the State of Washington and operates independently of the Legislature and the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee. Staff to the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Committee prepare a summary of public testimony on State Auditor reports. These summaries are for informational purposes only, and do not serve as an assessment by committee staff of the findings and recommendations issued by the State Auditor nor do they reflect a staff opinion on legislative intent.

Title:	Washington State Department of Transportation Managing and Reducing Congestion in Puget Sound
Audit Scope and Objectives:	<p>Auditors examined data on speeds, travel times, and traffic volumes for 2001 through 2006 on Interstate 5, Interstate 90, Interstate 405, State Route 520 and State Route 167 in the Puget Sound region. This review included estimates of the speed at which maximum throughput occurred, identified changes in the intensity and nature of congestion over time and compared chokepoint locations with roadway characteristics.</p> <p>In addition to the nine objective elements listed in Initiative 900, the audit was designed to determine:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The effectiveness of WSDOT's current highway investments and infrastructure utilizations given current and projected highway user volume over the next five years; and2. The financial and non-financial costs of any recommended improvements over the next five years. <p>In particular, this audit seeks to evaluate how current highway investments and infrastructure and possible highway investments and infrastructure can:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minimize congestion for the greatest possible majority of highway users.• Maximize vehicle throughput.• Maximize highway user throughput.

SAO Findings: Note: this audit is organized by “issues” rather than by “findings.” The audit identifies 22 issues.	SAO Recommendations: The Results section of the report contains 22 recommendations. The majority of these are directed to the Department of Transportation. Four recommendations are directed to the Legislature.
Issue 1: WSDOT does not focus on congestion as a primary goal.	1a. We recommend the Washington State Legislature choose/identify projects based on congestion reduction rather than other agendas. 1b. We recommend WSDOT commit to congestion management and reduction as a primary goal.
Issue 2: WSDOT must use a combination of all available tools to effectively mitigate congestion.	2. We recommend WSDOT use all tools at its disposal to mitigate the growth in traffic congestion recognizing the relative contributions each tool can make, its benefits, and associated costs with a focus on generating maximum congestion relief.
Issue 3: A legacy of outdated design practices from previous eras degrade the effective capacity of the freeway network.	3. We recommend WSDOT reduce weaving and other traffic conflicts across the Puget Sound freeway network focusing on: improving interchange design; eliminating some left-hand exits; reconfiguring key interchanges/freeway segments that experience significant weaving, merging, and safety hazards; adding reversible lanes where practical; and using collector/distributor configurations wherever practical.
Issue 4: WSDOT’s lack of focus on general purpose capacity in the last 20 years has resulted in a shortfall in lane miles relative to population growth and traffic demand.	4. We recommend WSDOT accelerate design and construction of new lanes and additional capacity to address the previous 20-year deficit.
Issue 5: Multimodal planning in the Puget Sound region is not focused on cost-effective congestion reduction.	5. We recommend WSDOT apply congestion-related goals, objectives, and benchmarks to all highway and transit-related investments.
Issue 6: WSDOT has not emphasized congestion reduction in its decision making process.	6. We recommend WSDOT elevate congestion reduction benefits in all decision-making processes.
Issue 7: Project programming does not reflect clear linkages to planning and prioritization.	7. We recommend WSDOT better link project planning, prioritization and programming to reflect congestion reduction goals.
Issue 8: WSDOT is not managing congestion through a system of measurable performance objectives.	8. We recommend WSDOT (or a new regional transportation entity) manage traffic congestion through a system of measurable performance objectives.
Issue 9: A lack of traffic signal system coordination in the Puget Sound region contributes significantly to delays.	9. We recommend WSDOT (or a new regional entity) collaborate with the Puget Sound Regional Council and other local jurisdictions to implement a traffic signal coordination program for major arterials in the region.
Issue 10: HOT lanes offer an untapped method to use available HOV capacity and improve reliability.	10. We recommend WSDOT deploy future HOT lane projects aggressively if the SR 167 pilot is successful.
Issue 11: Current legislation limits expansion of HOT lanes and use of tolls.	11. We recommend the Washington State Legislature implement new legislation to facilitate the expansion of road pricing should WSDOT’s HOT lane pilot be successful.

SAO Findings (cont):	SAO Recommendations (cont):
Issue 12: No single entity in the Puget Sound region has the authority or resources to implement solutions to congestion-related issues.	12. We recommend the Washington State Legislature empower a single body – either WSDOT or a new regional transportation entity for the Puget Sound region – to allow for a more integrated approach to planning for congestion reduction.
Issue 13: WSDOT is not expanding its successful commute trip reduction program.	13. We recommend WSDOT’s Commuter Trip Reduction Program be expanded to include increased financial incentives, additional financial disincentives, and regional marketing.
Issue 14: WSDOT’s Commute Trip Reduction Program does not include an aggressive telecommute component.	14. We recommend WSDOT implement a telecommute program focusing on telework incentives.
Issue 15: WSDOT’s real-time traffic information is not available for most arterials and some key freeways.	15. We recommend WSDOT use available technology to expand coverage of real-time traffic information to all freeways and major arterials.
Issue 16: Lack of funding limits many useful congestion-related operations projects.	16. We recommend WSDOT work to fully fund operations programs that emphasize congestion management.
Issue 17: WSDOT ramp metering coverage is not complete.	17. We recommend WSDOT: continue to improve its ramp metering system; expand it to other locations; assess its ramp-control algorithms.
Issue 18: WSDOT manual response to freeway operations decreases efficiency.	18. We recommend WSDOT automate all freeway management tools.
Issue 19: WSP staffing issues hinder efficient incident response.	19. We recommend WSDOT, in conjunction with the Washington State Patrol, improve its current incident response system through resolution of WSP staffing issues and an all agency after-action review process for every closure over 90 minutes.
Issue 20: The State of Washington has not taken advantage of private sector financing options.	20. We recommend the Washington State Legislature review whether new legislation is required for public private partnerships for transportation infrastructure and implement any necessary changes.
Issue 21: Persistent congestion problems on I-5 through downtown Seattle will require an assessment of all potential solutions.	21. We recommend WSDOT and the region pursue potential enhancements to I-5 in downtown Seattle.
Issue 22: The Puget Sound region has an extensive HOV network, but the policy for how it is operated has not been reviewed for some time.	22. We recommend WSDOT: complete the core HOV network, with an emphasis on the I-5 corridor to Tacoma; consider adjusting current policy where needed in order to meet existing performance standards; critically examine expensive interchanges and direct ramp access before additional investments.
Agency Responses in Audit Report?	Yes. Responses from the Department of Transportation and the Office of Financial Management are dispersed through the Results section of the report rather than contained in a single appendix.
Legislative Action Requested?	Yes, in recommendations 1a, 11, 12, and 20.

Staff Summary of Testimony from Audited Agencies:

The audit focused exclusively on congestion and did not address the other priorities that the Department of Transportation must address. Congestion is critical and is a priority for us as we prioritize and plan projects around the state, particularly in Puget Sound. We have heard from the Legislature that we must maintain the ability to use the existing infrastructure to move traffic. If we lose our roads and bridges, congestion gets worse. We must prioritize the preservation and maintenance of our system, in addition to safety and relieving congestion. Safety and congestion relief go hand in hand and cannot be separated. The audit recognizes national views of congestion relief as three legs of a stool: building projects; relieving choke points and bottlenecks, and adding lanes. We are building projects. The second leg calls for good operational strategies. The audit recognizes that DOT is a national leader in this area, and there are additional improvements we can make. The third leg is to reduce demand. In an era when we have an increasing population and increased travel, we have to consider how to reduce demand. In the new highway plan that is coming out, we have changed the way we measure congestion, using a criterion of maximum throughput.

We appreciate the audit's highlighting of the challenges associated with congestion in Puget Sound. We wish that the audit would have acknowledged more explicitly the competing demands of preservation, maintenance, safety, and congestion within existing resources. We have our priorities right. Preserving the public asset of 7,000 lane miles and keeping safe over 3,000 bridges is something that people who are sitting in traffic take for granted. We have a position about our priorities, which does not mean the exclusion of congestion. We have a balanced approach for maintaining our asset while moving people through the Puget Sound area.

Staff Summary of Testimony from Other Parties:

I measure the congestion problem very simply, using my commute time. The major problem is the delay time of passenger vehicles on the roads. The audit clearly points out that our transportation system is not working well. The overwhelming recommendation is for WSDOT to make congestion management a primary goal. There needs to be an attitudinal change. Everyone is wed to the answers of the past. I had doubts about whether this audit would ever be completed because of interference with the process. This is a process that should not be interfered with, and I encourage the State Auditor to take the appropriate actions if it happens again. The recommendations are clear and should be taken seriously. Going back and rationalizing what has not worked is not going to solve the problem.

This conflict and tug of war is exactly what we have been wanting for a long time. The fact that there is such defensiveness about the State Auditor hiring an independent firm to determine whether our state Department of Transportation is doing what the people want makes this a very happy day for me. I-900 is not the Legislature's tool; it belongs to the people. It includes making recommendations for statutory changes. It should tell you something when the people are telling you that your priority list is wrong. The Legislature repealed all of the intent language on goals last year, taking away traffic congestion relief even being a priority. You can't accomplish a goal unless you set it. The agencies are saying that they are going to continue to do what they do because they know better.

First, this audit finds what most of us consider unbelievable – that our state Department of Transportation does not think that congestion relief is a priority. Second, no one is in charge; 128 entities play some role in governing highways in Puget Sound, and none is committed to congestion relief. Third, it appears that the only time congestion relief is a priority is when the government is asking for more money. Finally, congestion in Puget Sound is a solvable problem. DOT currently has within its power a way to reduce congestion and help the regional economy. Congestion relief is not just a problem for DOT to fix. The Governor and Legislature must correct a flawed transportation budget process, define goals and accountability standards, and eliminate inefficient planning and poor agency structure. You may want to revisit a good transportation audit that JLARC conducted two years ago. The advice in this audit should be heeded, and the recommendations should be implemented now.

The audit says that, without voter approval of the Regional Transportation Investment District (RTID) and Proposition 1 in November, delay would be more than double the current level. The Blue Ribbon Commission recognized that the state's role was first to take care of its assets and protect its investments but that congestion had been neglected. With the passage of the nickel bill and the Transportation Partnership Account, significant funding was given to congestion relief. With the RTID proposals, we are able to leverage those investments by the state to make a dent in the congestion solution. One recommendation I would like to call attention to is the one about metrics – how to measure the success of our investments. There is no agreement among transportation planners and engineers on the best way to measure congestion. The Roads & Transit ballot proposition primarily uses the measures of reduction in delay and increase in speeds. In general, our state's response has been to seek a balanced solution that is a combination of capacity as well as transit. Many of the audit recommendations are being acted upon in the regional measure that is before voters this fall. The Legislature may want to follow up on the issue of metrics and how to measure success.

Agencies Testifying:

The Department of Transportation (Paula Hammond, Secretary)
The Office of Financial Management (Victor Moore, Director)

Other Parties Testifying:

Mike Dunmire, Citizen
Tim Eyman, Voters Want More Choices
Bob Williams, Evergreen Freedom Foundation
Kjristine Lund, Regional Transportation Investment District