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Guest columnists

Thanks, Legislature, for spurring action on regional transportation

By Slade Gorton, Dave Earling and Mike Vaska
Special to The Times

The Washington state Legislature told the Puget Sound region loudly and clearly last month: "Get your transportation act together!"

We congratulate the Legislature on two counts: first, for its leadership in 2003 and 2005 in passing ambitious, needed revenue packages for equally ambitious transportation construction programs; and, second, for recognizing that without regional deadlines, vital regional transportation decisions will only continue to be delayed.

The Legislature's mandate included a Jan. 1, 2007, deadline to submit a regional transportation governance reform package and financing plan to the Legislature; firm conclusions — including project, mitigation and financial plans — for both the Highway 520 bridge and Alaskan Way Viaduct, with evaluation by an expert review panel due Sept. 1, 2006; and integration of Sound Transit and the Regional Transportation Investment District (RTID) proposals into a single 2007 ballot measure for the next phase of major regional projects.

Whew! That's a lot of major work to be done in a short period of time. But we believe that the preparatory groundwork is in place and that these deadlines can and must be met.

Let's remember, 520 bridge planning began in the spring of 1997 and the Nisqually earthquake shook the viaduct in February 2002. Remember, too, that regional governance reforms were called for by the Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation in December 2000. And Sound Transit and RTID have been authorized to develop a joint ballot measure for the next phase of regional investment since the spring of 2002.

Coordinated and integrated road and transit plans have enjoyed great success in cities such as San Diego. In our area, however, these topics have been stuck in a process loop for at least four — and as long as nine — years. Action is long overdue.



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Cars, many with only one person inside, drive along Highway 520 toward Bellevue on the Evergreen Point Floating Bridge.

The media have reported extensively on the need for viaduct and 520 solutions, as well as mandates for joint road-and-transit ballot measures. Not as much attention, however, has been given to the mandate for regional governance reform and innovative financing plans.

The governor will appoint nine citizen members to the Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) this spring, no later than June 1. The RTC is to examine the current roles and governance of regional transportation agencies in King, Pierce, Snohomish and Kitsap counties — including those bodies with regional responsibilities: the Puget Sound Regional Council (planning and federal funding); Sound Transit (regional bus, commuter and light rail); the Regional Transportation Investment District (regional highways); and the state Department of Transportation.

The RTC then will recommend ways to streamline governance and decision-making. It will also assess long-term transportation needs and recommend how to finance them.

To do all this, the RTC must consult with and weigh the views of the transportation agencies that run the current system and of the public that pays the bills, put a draft recommendation forward for public comment by Nov. 15, and adopt a final recommendation and submit it to the Legislature no later than Jan. 1, 2007.

The Legislature requires that at least one of the governance options examined be a directly elected transportation government for the Puget Sound region. The financing options to be considered must include tolling.

The RTC has its work cut out for it. Governance reform could mean changes to the existing powers of current governments, their boards and staffs. Revenue options will require the discussion of new taxes and tolls. Changing the status quo and raising taxes are topics sure to generate vigorous debate and even controversy. But, if the RTC approaches this task with an open mind, listens well to local elected officials, transportation agency staff and the voting public, we may answer two important questions about transportation in Puget Sound: Who's in charge, and when do we move forward?

Thank you, Legislature, for mandating regional decisions and setting deadlines. Now it's up to us in the Puget Sound region to step up and get the job done.

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