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JBLM traffic puts a costly strain on the South Sound

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Joint Base Lewis-McChord troops back from Iraq or Afghanistan might think they've left a war zone only to face an army of road warriors on Interstate 5.

What once was a 40-minute commute between Tacoma and Olympia on most days to somewhat longer if an accident created backups has now become much longer – mainly because of thousands of additional personnel at JBLM. It's not unusual anymore for the trip between Tacoma and Olympia to take 90 minutes or more.

For South Sound commuters heading north on I-5, HOV lanes provide an incentive to ditch their vehicles and take the bus or carpool. Not so south of Tacoma. Without HOV lanes, buses and carpools get trapped in the same interminable gridlock as single-occupant vehicles.

JBLM is taking one welcome step in response to the traffic: On Monday it will open a new entrance on Mounts Road from 5 to 8 a.m. so that northbound I-5 traffic going to the base in the morning can opt to exit before piling up at the main entrance.

But the military needs to do more. It can't add thousands more people and their families and expect local taxpayers to foot the bill for road improvements to handle the crush. The situation only looks to get worse, as yet more troops reportedly will be coming to the base.

JBLM must change the way it does business, and quickly. It should look at encouraging carpools, vanpools and staggered shifts. And it needs to work with the state, local cities and the congressional delegation to move apace on the cross-base highway – which would keep a lot of vehicles from ever having to go on I-5 at all.

The state Department of Transportation has been making some tweaks – improving traffic signals at interchanges, boosting incident response crews – but clearly more needs to be done. Traffic that's not moving isn't just an inconvenience; it's a commerce killer.

Think of the trucks trying to move goods south from the Port of Tacoma. They don't have any alternative to I-5. And thousands of people idling in traffic contribute to lost productivity, not to mention higher emissions in the environmentally sensitive Nisqually River delta.

A related subject is the fight over moving the Camp Murray gate from its present site near I-5 to a location reached by driving through Tillicum. A dispute between the state military department and the City of Lakewood has killed the project for the time being, but the problem still needs solving.

City officials aren't averse to a new gate. They're just not convinced that the location Camp Murray officials wanted was the best one or that the mitigations they proposed to alleviate impacts on Tillicum residents were sufficient.

Right now, tempers are frayed on the subject. After everyone cools off, the subject should be resurrected – this time with plenty of input up front from the people who would be most affected: the residents of Tillicum.



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