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Lawmakers, Lewis-McChord discuss Interstate 5 traffic congestion

I-5 traffic: Lawmakers discuss Lewis-McChord congestion, but funding continues to be an issue

CHRISTIAN HILL; STAFF WRITER

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The Interstate 5 bottleneck near Joint Base Lewis-McChord is drawing the attention of state legislators as city and state officials clamor for improvements along the key commuter and freight corridor.

Both the House and Senate transportation committees were given briefings from the Washington State Department of Transportation this week on the 11-mile segment between the Thurston-Pierce county line and the junction with state Route 512.

"We're going to be hearing a lot about this," said Sen. Mary Margaret Haugen, D-Camano Island, at the conclusion of Monday's work session. She chairs the Senate Transportation Committee.

The early legislative meetings are the latest reaction to a fact that has become painfully obvious to drivers of that stretch of freeway: It is at least a decade beyond its design life, and is straining during peak commuting hours to accommodate increasing traffic volumes.

The problem is fed by growth at the military base – an estimated 18,000 soldiers returned from deployments this year, and the base is projected to add thousands more soldiers and their families.

A couple of state senators related personal stories Monday. Sen. Randi Becker, R-Eatonville, recalled being stuck in traffic for hours in July during the air show at McChord Field. She noted how personalities on an Olympia radio station make light of the commute.

"It's really sad it has become a joke because it's not a joke," she said. "People spend hours and hours sitting on the freeway waiting to get somewhere."

Initiatives launched by Lewis-McChord and the WSDOT have relieved some pressure. The base opened its gate on Mounts Road for morning traffic starting Oct. 1 and has increased staff at other gates to get vehicles through faster. WSDOT tweaked the timing of traffic signals at interchanges and, in conjunction with the State Patrol, increased incident response to clear wrecks faster, said John Nesbit, the state traffic engineer.

Other minor fixes are on the way. Nesbit said the state has \$600,000 available to install ramp meters on northbound onramps at Hawks Prairie, Nisqually and Mounts Road. The system should be ready after Labor Day.

In addition, WSDOT has budgeted \$1.6 million to expand traffic cameras and data stations south to DuPont to give drivers additional real-time traffic information. It will bid out the project next spring.

Nesbit said the stretch of roadway has been at the "tipping point" since 2005. His presentation to legislators noted that the average daily traffic on northbound I-5 near the DuPont interchange already exceeds its capacity of 60,000 vehicles a day.

Two hard realities face frustrated commuters on the road ahead: Traffic is projected to worsen, and there's no significant funding available to increase capacity.

The 11-mile segment has bucked the trend seen in other areas where there was a reduction in congestion from 2006 to 2008 due to the economic downturn and loss of employment, according to a study released in September that examined the impact of Lewis-McChord's growth on the I-5 corridor.

"With the current and future base expansions, it is likely that the travel trends on I-5 in the study area will continue to increase," the study said. "As the economy recovers and the rest of the region also begins picking up again, it is highly likely that traffic growth will resume a steady climb upward."

The study, sponsored by the City of Lakewood and involving WSDOT, Lewis-McChord and other agencies, proposes projects at a conceptual level to add capacity. The projects include major upgrades to four antiquated interchanges, a fourth travel lane in each direction between Thorne Lane and Mounts Road, and construction of the long-planned cross-base highway.

The eye-popping total cost estimate: between \$960 million and \$1.1 billion.

State Transportation Secretary Paula Hammond didn't offer hope Monday in her response to a question by Sen. Mike Carrell, R-Lakewood, about when the state will "fix this hairball."

She said her agency doesn't even have funding for the next step in the project: completing a study mandated by the federal government.

The concepts identified in the new study would serve as the framework for that study. The report's estimated price tag: \$6 million.

"We need to have the funding to start that study," Hammond said, adding that WSDOT will ensure that Washington's political delegations at the state and federal levels have good information on the impacts of the congestion.

The state was unsuccessful securing \$3 million in federal grants earlier this year to begin that work. WSDOT spokeswoman Lisa Copeland said competition was stiff and especially difficult because the grant program focused on transit and other travel alternatives.

Other agencies are working with WSDOT.

The City of Lakewood has identified reducing congestion through the corridor as a high priority during the coming legislative session and has asked lawmakers to "move aggressively." Interstate 5 bisects Pierce County's second-largest city, and the congestion impacts economic development, emergency response and quality of life, Lakewood spokesman Jeff Brewster said.

J.C. Mathews, a Lewis-McChord spokesman, said the base is working closely with the state and provided some information used in the presentations to the legislative committees.

"I think we're pretty much hand in glove with WSDOT going forward," he said.

Those efforts are made more challenging by the fact that state legislators are faced with a \$5 billion budget shortfall for the two year-period starting in July.

But the traffic cause might get a boost when area lawmakers begin commuting next month from their home districts to the state capital.

"The legislators sit in traffic, too," said Dan Penrose, a Lakewood planner who is the city's point man on the study. "We have a captive audience."

Christian Hill: 253-274-7390 christian.hill@thenewstribune.com (<mailto:christian.hill@thenewstribune.com>)

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