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## **It's time to fix Interstate 5 problem created by JBLM growth**

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Eight short years ago, Fort Lewis had 19,000 active-duty soldiers. With the recent announcement that the 1,400-member 16th Combat Aviation Brigade is coming to Joint Base Lewis-McChord, the population will swell to 45,000, including 33,000 Army soldiers alone.

With that rapid expansion – primarily the three Stryker brigades – has come increased pressure on the South Sound infrastructure, most notably the motorists trying to navigate Interstate 5.

State transportation officials have identified \$1 billion in unfunded capital projects that would improve traffic around Lewis-McChord. But for now, state officials are focusing on minor fixes, such as installing stop lights at highway on-ramps and encouraging the base to open more gates.

State and military officials must do better. I-5 is the most important and most heavily traveled north/south corridor in this state. It's a key factor in this state's trade-dependent economy and a big contributor to this state's economic vitality. We need only remember back to the winter storms in mid-December 2009 that flooded Interstate 5 in Lewis County. The freeway was closed for three days, bringing commerce to a near halt.

Then, last summer, when thousands of troops returned from the battlefield in the Middle East and had to report to JBLM daily, the traffic congestion between Olympia and the base went from bad to horrible overnight.

Morning commuter traffic in the northbound lanes backed up for five, six, seven miles on a daily basis. Longtime South Sound commuters said they were forced to add an hour to their morning travel time – disrupting family life.

Only after officials at the joint base opened a second entrance gate at Mounts Road did the congestion dissipate.

The aviation brigade is a coveted asset for Lewis-McChord because it enhances training opportunities for infantry units that rely on helicopters when they're deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Make no mistake. It's good for the community, too. Those 1,400 soldiers and 44 new helicopters will be good neighbors, and the soldiers' paychecks will ring through local cash registers, giving a much-needed boost to the South Sound economy.

But Lakewood spokesman Jeff Brewster summed it up nicely when he said, "We love those additional 1,400 soldiers, but we need more support. I-5 cuts our city in half, and we get hit with congestion."

Army officials say the addition of the aviation brigade will be the last for a while. Once established, the Army has plans to add just 600 more soldiers at the base by 2016.

A period of no, or slow, growth would allow local officials to catch their breath and catch up on some of the projects necessary to cope with the rapid expansion at the base.

Let's face it, growing from 19,000 in 2003 to 45,000 at both installations today, has been incredibly taxing on local resources – from schools to roads. Base officials are working on projects to catch up such as expanding a sewage treatment plant. President Barack Obama's 2012 budget proposal includes \$300 million in base-related construction work over the next few years.

“We've had a lot of growth,” says U.S. Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Belfair, a pivotal player on military expenditures in Congress. “You just never know what's going to happen. I would've never suspected we'd have three Stryker brigades.”

It's imperative that Joint Base Lewis-McChord officials collaborate with local governments on planning for expansion of roadways and other infrastructure projects. This is the time to make a substantial dent in that \$1 billion in backlogged projects, not only to meet the expansive growth at Joint Base Lewis-McChord but to accommodate the nonmilitary families who have settled in South Sound in the last decade, too.

JBLM is an economic driver for the South Sound. Having to solve a congestion problem is a nice problem to have, compared to the alternative. But our economy is dependent upon the Interstate 5 lifeline. That lifeline has been put in jeopardy by the rapid expansion at Joint Base Lewis-McChord. It's time to catch up.