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All parties must work together to resolve I-5 congestion

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Ask anyone who must travel north on Interstate 5 during the morning commute and they will tell you horror stories about the traffic backups.

Gridlock is no longer the exception. Backups, starting at 6 a.m., of three, six, nine or more miles long are the rule. It's not uncommon to have a stop-and-go traffic all the way from DuPont in Pierce County to Sleater Kinney Road in the heart of Lacey.

"Rarely we're seeing an accident," said Amy Malkames of Olympia, who makes the morning commute to DuPont where she is a teacher at the middle school. "There's no lane closures. There's no reason for it besides all these extra cars."

There is a reason.

We know that Olympia (and environs) is a company town and the company is state government. It's our single largest employer.

What many people don't know, however, is that more people leave the South Sound community every morning to commute to jobs outside Thurston County than work for state government. Think about it. Think about every state worker in every state office in Olympia, Lacey and Tumwater. Now imagine more people than that headed to the freeway each morning and returning home each evening. We've truly become a bedroom community for Seattle, Federal Way and Tacoma.

No wonder that I-5 is increasingly clogged with those early-morning commuters.

Add to that the fact that 18,000 soldiers from Joint Base Lewis-McChord have recently returned home, and it's painfully clear that the freeway is simply incapable of handling the normal flow of traffic.

And it's about to get worse.

Army officials say that South Sound soon will play host to an additional 5,700 active-duty soldiers and 8,600 family members. They say the number of active-duty soldiers at the base will approach 36,000, a number that does not include Air Force or other service members on the newly consolidated base.

Many of those new residents will join the madhouse on I-5.

Recently, the state Department of Transportation announced a series of actions to help relieve northbound congestion between DuPont and Lacey.

"We've seen a definite population growth over the years that's put us very near capacity," admits Transportation

spokeswoman Lisa Copeland. “We think that those numbers were kind of the straw that broke the camel’s back.”

Among the immediate fixes:

- Improving the timing of traffic signals at the DuPont/Steilacoom and Nisqually interchanges.
- Boosting incident response crews to five from two to quickly clear disabled vehicles.
- Working closely with Lewis-McChord to coordinate congestion-reducing measures.

Those are steps in the right direction.

Hopefully, the base commander at the military installation will recognize the need to explore other alternatives, from staggered work hours to additional base entrances to take pressure off the freeway. The planned opening of a new exit off Mounts Road certainly is a step in the right direction.

Lewis-McChord could reopen old gates on other parts of the base that are going unused, rather than funnel so much traffic through the main gate of the former Fort Lewis.

Base officials also should encourage the troops to carpool, and press for park-and-ride lots to accommodate base-bound soldiers. Think how many vehicles could be taken off the road if military officials ran buses between Lacey and JBLM during the morning and evening commute.

J.C. Mathews, a Lewis-McChord spokesman, acknowledges that the growth at the military installation is adding to the problem. “We’ve had a pretty significant amount of growth here since 2003,” he said, “about 14,000 active-duty soldiers added to the active-duty population here and the families that come with us.”

I-5 cannot be widened tomorrow. Expansion is a long process. It took 10 years to expand the freeway between Lacey and Tumwater. It’s a costly endeavor, too.

“I don’t think we can build our way out of congestion on I-5,” said Lisa Copeland, a spokeswoman for the Department of Transportation. “There’s just no room.”

Longer-term solutions under consideration by state Transportation officials include installation of metered on-ramps (traffic signals that allow one car at a time to enter the freeway), more traffic cameras and “real-time” traffic information so motorists know if the roadway is clogged. About the only alternative route – through Yelm, McKenna and Roy – can be equally problematic and crowded for motorists. That is until a cross-base highway is eventually built.

It’s essential that Joint Base Lewis-McChord officials continue to recognize that they are part of the traffic problem. They must continue to work with community leaders and Transportation officials to help resolve the traffic congestion nightmare that haunts northbound motorists on a daily basis.