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Ramp meters will help – but they're far from cure

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The nightmarish, rush-hour commute on Interstate 5 between Lacey and Joint Base Lewis-McChord should improve a little bit in the weeks ahead.

The Washington State Department of Transportation is set to install by Labor Day traffic meters on three on-ramps in the vicinity of the military base – Mounts Road in south Pierce County, and Nisqually and Marvin roads in north Thurston County.

These are the first traffic meters to be installed along the I-5 corridor through the two counties. If they work as intended, they should help keep merging traffic from clogging up the freeway.

In addition, WSDOT will place seven traffic cameras between Lacey and Joint Base Lewis-McChord. The cameras will provide real-time traffic information to the state highway agency and the public, alerting them to traffic jams and accidents as they develop.

But let's be honest: The projects are not much more than Band-Aids on a festering transportation ailment that cries out for bigger remedies, solutions that cost big money.

WSDOT is prepared to spend \$2 million on this Interstate 5 bottleneck that reached major proportions last spring, summer and fall as some 18,000 soldiers returned from yearlong deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

JBLM is growing faster than the highway system can handle. And the types of projects that could provide meaningful traffic relief have a price tag close to \$1 billion. They include:

- Upgrade four aging interchanges serving the stretch of I-5 between Lacey and JBLM. So far, state lawmakers have only been able to come up with about \$1 million in funding to begin engineering and design of one or more of the interchanges.
- Widen I-5 and construct a cross-base highway. A cross-base highway has been discussed and debated since it was first designated as state Route 704 by the state Legislature in 2002. Short on funding and attacked by environmentalists as destructive of the base's oak prairie woodland habitat, the highway has only advanced through one minor phase of a five-phase project in 10 years.
- Work on traffic reduction projects that ease congestion through staggered work shifts, van pools and bus routes that get people out of their single-occupancy vehicles and into alternative forms of commuting.

To that end, the state Legislature did provide \$520,000 for van pool vehicles to serve both soldiers and civilian employees at Lewis-McChord.

The federal government also has an obligation to help solve traffic congestion on and around the military base. But

members of Congress representing Pierce and Thurston counties face an uphill battle because of to the budget deficit, across-the-board cost-cutting in federal agencies and a low tolerance of congressional earmarks legislators have historically used to funnel federal funds back home to pay for projects.

Sen. Patti Murray, D-Wash., has introduced language in a pending federal transportation budget to make it easier for communities impacted by military base growth to qualify for off-base highway improvement money.

But, at the same time, the budget environment in Washington, D.C., is not favorable. The same holds true on the chances of garnering state money for big highway projects around Lewis-McChord.

By most accounts, the traffic congestion from Lacey through Joint Base Lewis-McChord this summer is nowhere near as crippling as it was this time a year ago. And the modest measures under construction this summer should help.

But full-blown relief remains wishful thinking, as long as the base and I-5 traffic continue to grow in the face of shrinking state and federal budgets.