

This is a printer friendly version of an article from the **The Olympian**.
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[\[Back\]](#)

Published December 19, 2011

Shoulder driving will help ease congestion near Lewis-McChord

CHRISTIAN HILL AND NATE HULINGS

Drivers will be able to travel on widened shoulders along Interstate 5 during heavy traffic as part of the state's effort to ease congestion near Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

Part of a \$15 million federal grant the state Department of Transportation secured Thursday will pay to allow "hard shoulder running" in both directions of the chronically congested freeway stretch between Berkeley Street and Thorne Lane.

The widened shoulders will improve traffic flow by giving motorists extra distance and time to exit I-5 or merge into traffic compared to on- and off-ramps, state officials say.

"It isn't as good as having a fourth lane, but it's the next best thing," said Ron Landon, a Transportation Department engineer who worked extensively on the grant application.

The shoulder running will be used in conjunction with overhead signs that notify drivers ahead of time when individual travel lanes are closed or blocked.

Another portion of the grant will pay for more ramp meters, now being built in Thurston County, through the 15-mile stretch of the important commuter and freight corridor.

The stop-and-go signals are intended to prevent merging traffic from clogging the freeway. Added on-ramp lanes will allow buses, vanpools and carpools to bypass the meters at some locations as an inducement for motorists not to drive alone.

The projects are intended to extend the life of the I-5 section until long-term fixes, estimated to cost more than \$1 billion, can be funded and constructed.

Growth at Lewis-McChord and throughout the region is "pushing capacity of the roadway to the tipping point," the grant application said, and the corridor is congested nearly 10 hours each day.

The grant award is another signal that the congestion and its implications on the state economy and national security has the attention of politicians.

Fifteen thousand freight trucks drive this stretch daily, the application said. Eighty percent of the 152,000 vehicles that pass through Lewis-McChord gates each day use I-5 for access, it said.

U.S. Rep. Norm Dicks, D-Belfair, said he and other federal lawmakers representing the region lobbied for the money. The U.S. Department of Transportation awarded 46 grants out of 848 submitted applications.

“The (Lewis-McChord) situation has been our highest transportation priority in the South Sound area,” Dicks said.

Washington’s grant application was for \$27 million and included installing ramp meters and bypass lanes on every interchange between state Route 510 in Thurston County and state Route 512 in Pierce County.

It also would have paid for hard shoulder running on northbound I-5 between the Lewis-McChord’s main gate and Berkeley Street.

With less money, construction of that section of widened shoulder is in doubt and the state will limit installation of ramp meters and bypass lanes to the most critical interchanges, Landon said.

Construction could begin as early as next summer.

Last month, Lakewood received a \$5.7 million federal grant to relieve congestion on and around the Berkeley Avenue interchange, the primary access to Madigan Army Medical Center that also serves the Tillicum neighborhood.

And a \$2 million project to install ramp meters and traffic cameras on the southern end of the corridor is behind schedule but should wrap up in January, said Dennis Engel, a state transportation project engineer.

Crews ran into issues that pushed the project beyond its initial October completion, including having to move fiber optics and wires, Engel said.

Crews have installed ramp meters on the ramps at Nisqually, Mounts and Marvin roads and seven traffic cameras between Marvin Road in Thurston County and Lewis-McChord.

The tentative turn-on date for the ramp meters is Jan. 9, with the cameras going live the same month, he said.

State traffic engineers say the updates will better control traffic merging onto I-5 during peak hours and uncover a six-mile blind spot so the Transportation Department and commuters can react better to backups and collisions.

The ramp and camera systems both need to be ready before either can be used effectively, Engel said.

“You want the cameras so you can monitor the traffic flow, so you can do the timing of the meters,” he said. “There’s some fine-tuning that has to go on out on the field, dealing with connections of fiber optics.”

Meanwhile, the congestion has been broached by members of a task force convened by Gov. Chris Gregoire to study ways to pay for the state’s most pressing transportation needs.

“It’s definitely been part of the Connecting Washington discussion,” said Jennifer Ziegler, the governor’s transportation policy adviser.

The task force recently recommended the state raise an additional \$21 billion over 10 years to invest in transportation projects. A group of lawmakers will start working on specifics next month and could emerge with a funding measure to put to voters in November.

Christian Hill: 253-274-7390

christian.hill@thenewstribune.com

Twitter: @TNTchill