

## In Our View: 'I-5 Slog' Gets Worse

### Areas near Centralia are better; congestion around military base has increased

As of Monday, April 11, 2011

Clark County residents have many reasons to drive to Olympia, Tacoma and Seattle, notwithstanding the Mariners' seven-game losing streak entering Monday night's game. The only way for motorists to get to those points in a reasonable amount of time is via Interstate 5, yet mere mention of the infamous "I-5 Slog" will elevate the blood pressure of many drivers and passengers.

Some stretches of the state's transportation spine have gone unimproved for decades, despite rapid growth in population and commercial and military operations. Even in tough economic times, it's imperative that state transportation planners maximize state and federal funding for I-5 enhancements. Otherwise, the quality of life in western Washington and the local economies will diminish as congestion intensifies.

On the positive side, there have been significant improvements recently along I-5. You might have noticed the widening from two lanes to three in each direction north of Centralia, for about seven miles from the intersection with U.S. Highway 12 at Grand Mound near Great Wolf Lodge, north to Maytown. Touch-up work continues on the wider stretch that opened about five months ago.

And at that same junction, work continues on a \$25.8 million replacement of the interchange. This is where Highway 12 leads west to Rochester and Aberdeen. Completion is expected in summer 2012, none too soon for I-5 Slog veterans who have seen traffic on that stretch of the freeway more than quadruple since 1968, from 17,000 vehicles per day to almost 80,000.

On the negative side, though, experienced I-5ers will agree that the worst bottleneck on the trip to or from Seattle is not in the biggest cities. It's around Joint Base Lewis-McChord between Olympia and Tacoma. The cause of that congestion is well-known to traffic planners around JBLM (the Army's Fort Lewis and the Air Force's McChord Air Force Base merged in February 2010). In just eight years, the active-duty military population has soared (or soon will) from 19,000 to 45,000, including 33,000 Army soldiers. As The Olympian newspaper reported Monday, the 1,400-member 16th Combat Aviation Brigade will report soon to the base. Last summer, thousands of troops returned from the Middle East and, according to The Olympian, "traffic congestion between Olympia and the base went from bad to horrible overnight ... 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."

Of course, through traffic suffered as well, not to mention freight haulers trying to get products to distributors and markets in a timely fashion.

About \$1 billion in capital improvements are envisioned by state transportation officials around the base, but the projects remain unfunded, and only minor fixes are envisioned short-term. Those could include stoplights on onramps and opening more gates into the military facilities.

As we've learned here with the challenges of the Columbia River Crossing, stakeholders in I-5 projects extend far beyond local populations. With our state so dependent on tourism and freight distribution, the attention to I-5 cannot be allowed to wither, even if funding is not immediately available.

Let's all look on the bright side: We're just one national economic recovery away from making the I-5 Slog more tolerable.