

# [ COMMENTARY ]

OPINION & LETTERS

## Think Twice on I-90

**GUEST COLUMN** There are alternatives to bulldozing homes in East Central **JOHN COVERT**

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) says that the Spokane area has languished behind other cities in developing its transportation infrastructure. Their solution is the \$1 billion North Spokane Corridor (NSC) Project. A 1998 analysis of the Texas Transportation Institute's exhaustive study of congestion in more than 70 metropolitan areas (which included Spokane) finds that regions which invested heavily in road capacity (as WSDOT is proposing to do) fared no better in reducing congestion than those that spent far less. It seems that researchers have documented that excess road capacity generated by adding lane capacity is eaten up by "induced travel" (if you build it they will come!). This same fate awaits the NSC Project!

WSDOT says traffic safety issues are of paramount concern and one of the cornerstones of the freeway construction efforts. They produced an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) in the late-1990s

for this project and used it to pick their Preferred Alternative (an eight-lane-wide North Spokane Freeway coupled with a complete reconfiguration of I-90 through the East Central Neighborhood). Their EIS identifies only nine intersections within the metropolitan Spokane arterial grid that will see "significant improvement" in traffic congestion. Data presented in Table 2-9 of the EIS shows that only one of these nine "improved" intersections currently experiences unacceptable congestion. The EIS does acknowledge that literally dozens and dozens of the city's most congested intersections will still exhibit unacceptable congestion problems in the year 2020, with or without the freeway project. The failing intersections on this much larger list are well known to any of us who brave the streets of Spokane today: Division and Francis; Division and Wellesley; Mission and Hamilton; Division and Country Homes Boulevard; Nevada and Francis; Freya and Trent, just to name a few. If we are truly concerned about traffic safety issues, perhaps the \$1 billion price tag should be directed towards solving existing traffic safety problems that are still going to be there when the NSC is finished.

WSDOT admits that the new I-90 will consist of 14 high-speed through lanes and five on- and off-ramp lanes for a total of 19

lanes inside the limited access freeway right-of-way. The current I-90 lane configuration through the East Central neighborhood has six high-speed freeway lanes. That is 19 freeway lanes compared to the existing six lanes. WSDOT says they are only adding two lanes in each direction. They must be using some sort of 'new math.' WSDOT likes to count the existing lanes on Second and Third avenues in their inventory of existing high-speed lane capacity. These streets are now 30 mph residential streets with kids playing on their front lawns and cars parked at the curbs. There are stop signs and occasional traffic lights. To count these as equal to four 70 mph freeway lanes is ridiculous. To imply that lane capacity is only slightly increased is dishonest.

WSDOT says the reconfigured I-90 will use the same corridor that has been in place since the mid-1950s. What they fail to mention is that the new right-of-way will be approximately 600 feet wide (almost two football fields placed end to end). They also

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forgot to mention that they have to destroy 374 housing units in the East Central Neighborhood - 74 percent of all housing units destroyed for this entire project are located in the East Central neighborhood. WSDOT doesn't consider this to be a social justice issue; it's just a coincidence that the poorest neighborhood suffers the most. This injustice is heaped on top of the loss of community that the East Central Neighborhood endured when the original six-lane freeway went in decades ago.

What does this 19-lane freeway in East Central do to the downtown viaduct? Remember that the I-90 viaduct section will still be only six lanes wide in the year 2020 when WSDOT's project is scheduled to be completed. Common sense tells you that 14 through lanes necking down to six lanes will create congestion. Only limited modeling of the viaduct section has been conducted to date. WSDOT does know that traffic congestion will be worse on the viaduct under the year 2020 "Build" scenario than under the "No Build" scenario. They know that peak morning and afternoon traffic counts will go up by 1,300 cars. We at Citizens for Sensible Transportation Planning strongly believe that the repercussions from dramatically expanding the I-90 section through the East Central neighborhood on the downtown

viaduct section need to be comprehensively and thoroughly studied before any final construction decisions are made on any sections of I-90.

CSTP fully recognizes that the Spokane area is an eager and willing participant (albeit a small player) in the new global economy. For our area to grow and prosper, we need to accommodate the long-distance movement of goods and services (think Mexico to Canada - NAFTA). The fundamental flaw in WSDOT's planning efforts in this regard has been their focus on moving those goods through the system's weakest link, the urban core. Long distance haulers don't have any intention of stopping by Nordstrom for an afternoon of shopping, nor do they want to stay the night at the soon-to-be-reopened Davenport Hotel. Yet they are going to have to jockey for position with the folks who do want to go downtown because WSDOT's vision of the future has that traffic concentrated into the urban core. Their 900+ page EIS devotes five pages to a discussion of beltways that skirt the urban core. Alternatives do exist. Over the past half decade, Spokane County has quietly been assembling, piece by piece, major elements of an arterial system that will function like an urban beltway. Their vision utilizes existing rights of way that stretch from Hayford Road in Airway Heights; to Farwell Road on the north end; to Bigelow Gulch and Sullivan Road on the east side. They think it can be completed for under \$150 million dollars (only 15 percent of the cost of the NSC). At that price, there should still be \$850 million dollars left to alleviate the congestion at intersection after intersection that the NSC was never going to solve. Creative, cost-effective solutions like this need to be more fully explored and factored into the traffic modeling calculus before any East Central neighborhood homes get bulldozed, not after. ■

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