

# DOT should reconsider massive Spokane project

BY JOHN COVERT  
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**S**POKANE — The overwhelming defeat of Referendum 51 did not eliminate the state's transportation problems. Nor did it put an end to the debate about how to fund transportation infrastructure.

Referendum 51 offered a laundry list of projects the state Department of Transportation (DOT) wanted to construct. An obvious question was whether these projects would address and correct real transportation bottlenecks. Can the department be trusted to spend our tax dollars wisely?

I don't know about the "high priority" projects the transportation department still plans to fund on the west side of the state, but I have spent countless hours studying the only "major project" it plans to fund in Eastern Washington.

The \$1.4 billion North Spokane Corridor Project is going to result in a 10-mile-long, six- to eight-lane-wide north/south freeway where there currently isn't one. Where this behemoth intersects the existing Interstate 90 freeway in Spokane's East Central neighborhood, the department is going to completely reconfigure three miles of the existing freeway.

Today, I-90 is six lanes wide. When construction is finished, it will be up to 18 lanes wide. They are going to quadruple the width of the existing concrete surface and triple the width of the freeway right-of-way.

Every house, approaching 400 residential units, located along three miles of two residential streets that straddle the existing freeway will be bulldozed to make way for this "new and improved" I-90. A thousand of Spokane's poorest residents will be, to use the transporta-

tion department's language, "displaced."

There are many aspects of this \$1.4 billion project that upset me. The one that should bother every taxpayer can be teased out of the Governor's Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation December 2000 "Report to the Legislature." The commission found that Spokane's regional congestion index is one-quarter of the national average and about 14 percent of Puget Sound's traffic-congestion index. The commission established a target. It hopes to get Washington's truly congested cities back down to the national average by year 2020.

Spokane's problems would have to quadruple to get us up to the national average. I would argue that it is fiscally irresponsible to be spending \$1.4 billion on this project when serious, legitimate problems go unfunded on the west side of the state.

The new funding proposals already on the post-Referendum 51 table intend to carry on with the same "build capacity" mantra that the referendum offered. Common sense tells us that dramatically increasing capacity — as the transportation department intends to do — will create more congestion.

This "if you build it, they will come" logic has a name. It's called "induced travel," and university researchers nationwide have been documenting its ill effects for the past decade. We can't build our way out of congestion but that is precisely what the department of transportation wants to do. Why? It's the biggest make-work project in state history. The department would be fully staffed for decades while it manages the megaprojects that we taxpayers would be paying off for the rest of our lives.

The former chairman of the Wash-

ington Transportation Commission is a Spokane resident. During his tenure, he acted as one of the North Spokane Corridor Project's biggest cheerleaders. To improve taxpayer confidence, the transportation commission needs to spend more time critically evaluating and analyzing the transportation department's multi-billion-dollar transportation projects, not cheerleading for them.

The commission should be the department's harshest critic, making sure that every one of our precious tax dollars is directed at worthwhile and justifiable projects.

The transportation department and the commission need to critically re-evaluate the list of "high priority" projects that they want us reluctant taxpayers to fund. If taxpayers are going to fund a \$1.4 billion project, the money should solve a legitimate, existing problem (of which there are many to choose from, especially in the Puget Sound area).

The department's unwavering support of a fiscally irresponsible project like the North Spokane Corridor Project epitomizes why taxpayers mistrust state bureaucracies and why they overwhelmingly rejected Referendum 51. As taxpayers, we must hold the department accountable and demand that it change its ways.

*John Covert is a hydrogeologist and a founding member of Citizens for Sensible Transportation Planning, a coalition concerned with how the Washington State Department of Transportation is planning road projects in the Spokane area.*

