

GUEST OPINION

North-south freeway not the solution

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For the past 15 years, the Washington state Department of Transportation has steadfastly planned to construct a north-south freeway with eight lanes of traffic coming into Interstate 90. All of a sudden, they have decided that they can cut the footprint in half, cancel a critical interchange and "save" the taxpayers \$400 million.

The real reason they can downsize the project is that we have never needed it. Spokane's congestion problems do not warrant a new, 10-mile-long, \$3 billion-plus freeway.

Our state government is facing a \$6 billion shortfall. At the national level we are hemorrhaging trillions of dollars. Our nation's infrastructure is crumbling around us. To press forward with an ill-conceived and unnecessary make-work project because it "saves" us \$400 million is ludicrous. Our children's children will be paying off the debts that we are racking up because we haven't made the commitment and sacrifices necessary to wean ourselves from foreign oil and single-occupant vehicles.

More freeways aren't the answer. A University of California at Berkeley report to the Federal Highway Administration in 2004 documented that for every dollar of government spending on highways, taxpayers saved only 11 cents in congestion costs in the year that spending occurred.

State Transportation Department statistics demonstrate that Puget Sound drivers spend 47,000 hours per day stuck in congested traffic. The comparable number for the Spokane area is only 900 hours per day. By any metric you use, our regional congestion problems don't warrant the expenditure of funds that the DOT is proposing. It is fiscally irresponsible to be funding the north-south freeway project when legitimate problems go unfunded elsewhere.

The Spokesman-Review's editorial view on Nov. 30 that "a scaled-back north-south freeway is better than nothing" is, in fact, wrong. The environmental impact statement for the project indicates that with two midtown interchanges (Francis and Wellesley), the freeway project would make congestion at Spokane's busiest, most congested intersections worse, not better.

The freeway as originally conceived makes congestion worse at the intersections of Division and Francis and Division and Wellesley. The new, scaled-back plan eliminates the interchange at Wellesley. This will drive even more congestion onto Francis, making the east-west commute across town worse. We are going to spend billions of dollars and make congestion at Spokane's most congested intersection worse.

The Spokesman-Review's editorial touches on the alternative funding sources that were considered for the north-south project and then rejected. The Department of Transportation thought about using a toll for the new freeway but rejected it because there are "too many alternative routes" that people would take to avoid the toll. These alternative routes are not congested enough to force drivers onto a toll road. It's this lack of congestion which demonstrates why we don't need the N-S freeway whether it is four or eight lanes wide.

A \$20 per car tab fee was considered but rejected because those funds are needed to address the area's legitimate transportation problem: lack of funding for road maintenance. Spokane's 2004 street bond moneys (more than \$117 million) are slated to fix only about 110 of Spokane's 900 miles of pavement. Long-term funding of street maintenance is the real transportation crisis that our elected officials need to address.

The environmental impact statement also never addressed the health impacts inflicted on neighborhoods by subjecting residents to new exhaust sources. The freeway right-of-way carves a path past schools and subdivisions that were previously not exposed to tens of thousands of cars and trucks per day. The new freeway is so close to several Mead schools that it almost casts a shadow onto school property. Yet the health impacts to those schoolchildren were not evaluated.

University-conducted studies of freeway projects through urban neighborhoods in California have proved that exhaust fumes cause serious health impacts to urban residents exposed to them. It is unconscionable that we will inflict these problems on folks unlucky enough to go to school or live in the path of a new freeway.

If the federal government insists on spending money on infrastructure projects as a means to jump-start the economy, then spend it on legitimate infrastructure shortfalls that we already have. The American Society of Civil Engineers estimates that \$1.6 trillion is needed to effectively and adequately fund our infrastructure shortfalls (including aviation, bridges, dams, drinking water, energy, hazardous waste, navigable waterways, public parks and recreation, rail, roads, schools, security, solid waste, transit and wastewater). Building an unjustifiable freeway is not the answer.