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Commentary]

What Problem?

Is Washington state spending \$3 billion on a freeway we don't really need? **JOHN COVERT**



The Washington State Department of Transportation needs to stop promoting unnecessary freeway construction projects like Spokane's North Spokane Corridor (NSC) project — the total cost is now projected to be over \$3 billion — and focus on solving the state's legitimate congestion problems. This poorly conceived project builds

10 miles of new freeway (up to eight lanes wide) where there currently isn't one and triples the number of freeway lanes inside the sound walls along I-90 where the two freeways merge. The state has already committed more than half-a-billion dollars to this project while worthwhile projects are starved for cash.

Last November, the Washington State Department of Transportation published its "2009 Congestion Report," which they suggest is a comprehensive analysis of system performance on state highways. They list the average weekday hours of delay for the Puget Sound region as 125,000 hours of delay per day. The value they assign to congestion in the Spokane area is 200 hours per day. Spokane's regional congestion is 0.2 percent of the Puget Sound area's gridlock, yet the WSDOT is spending more than \$3 billion to build the North Spokane Corridor project.

In an era of record budget deficits, it is fiscally irresponsible to be spending billions of dollars on an unnecessary freeway project when legitimate transportation projects go unfunded elsewhere in the state.

If you ask the WSDOT how they can justify this expenditure in light of their own analysis, they will divert your attention and say that some of Spokane's north/south arterials are locally congested and

this project will relieve those problems. They are ignoring their own Environmental Impact Statement for the project that demonstrates those congested intersections will still have failing levels of service whether or not the project gets built.

When you show them their own EIS data, they will switch their story and start talking about NAFTA and the need to move freight from Mexico to Canada. They will suggest that the lack of a north/south freeway is harming freight mobility. WSDOT's Freight Systems Division published an updated Freight Movement Plan in September of 2008. The report says "a high number — 79 percent of Spokane manufacturers are very satisfied with current freight system performance." They are spending \$3 billion to "solve" a problem that doesn't exist.

At this point they switch their story again and will say, "It's about jobs." We are building the freeway to create jobs. I am all for creating jobs. I just believe the work done by these jobs should benefit the greater community and alleviate a real, existing problem, of which there are many to choose from in Washington state.

With so little justification going for the NSC, why is the state funding this project? It has to do with the fact that WSDOT regional offices compete with each other for transportation dollars. Roughly 15 percent of the total cost of a construction project is funneled to the regional office to manage that effort. For a \$3 billion project like the NSC, that works out to \$450 million. Is it any wonder that the regional WSDOT office is this project's biggest cheerleader? Where is the statewide leadership taking a hard look at the merits of each project and making sure that only the necessary projects get funding? Layer on top of this the politics of Western Washington politicians needing to get eastside legislators support for the even more expensive Puget Sound transportation projects by occasionally funding a "mega" project east of the Cascades and you get the NSC.

We must insist that our precious tax dollars are spent wisely and only tackle legitimate transportation problems.

John Covert is a city of Spokane resident and president of Citizens for Sensible Transportation Planning (www.walkspokane.org).