

# WASHINGTON STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

## Meeting Summary

Mount Vernon, Washington

April 17, 2012

The local meeting of the Washington State Transportation Commission was called to order at 9:00 a.m., on Tuesday, April 17, 2012, at CottonTree Convention Center, 2300 Market Street, Mount Vernon, Washington.

### **CHAIR WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS**

Chair Ford opened the meeting with Commissioner and staff introductions.

### **MEETING SUMMARY APPROVAL/ADOPTION**

The meeting summary for March 17 & 18, 2012 was unanimously adopted.

### **TRANSPORTATION 101**

Commission Staff and Lorena Eng, Northwest Region Administrator, WSDOT, provided a Transportation 101 Overview.

[Transportation 101](#)

[Transportation 101 for Skagit and Island and Whatcom Counties](#)

### **COUNTY TRANSPORTATION ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES**

#### **Skagit County and Island County**

Skagit County Commissioner Ken Dahlstedt and Henry Hash, Skagit County Public Works Director talked about county challenges. There is an aging bridge inventory:

- 42 bridges over 50 years old
- 8 bridges over 70 years old

Skagit County partners with all the other governments in the county to accomplish projects. Most workers leave the county to get to work.

Until this year, Skagit County has not banked its levy. This year, due to the economy, the County did bank it. Commissioner Dahlstedt said that the Skagit Commission believes that people locally must chip in.

Commissioner Helen Price Johnson, Island County and Bill Oakes, Island County Public Works Director, spoke to the transportation challenges in Island County. The islands have two ferries and two road connections to the rest of the state. There is no rail connection and no commercial air service.

Concurrency standards are set by the state for Whidbey Island. Over 10,000 employed by NAS Whidbey, most commute into the county.

Budget outlook:

- Gas tax revenue (down).
- Property tax revenue (capped).
- Costs (up). Some costs up dramatically.

Island County has reduced staffing and scaled back capital plans. No new travel lanes built in over 20 years. Money has been shifted to maintenance.

Island County has not banked its capacity; it diverts about \$700,000 for sheriff patrols.

The Pavement Condition Index Chart shows that spending \$1 when pavement is still in good condition eliminates or delays spending \$6 to \$10 on rehabilitation or reconstruction later.

What does a Rural County Public Works Department do?

- Paving
- Chip Seal
- Grinding and Patching
- Mowing
- Striping

How to help:

- Recognize preservation and maintenance as a priority
- Need a program for new roads (can't compete well with no ADT)
- New revenue

Neither county has implemented a TBD; in Skagit County, where over 50% of schoolchildren qualify for free lunch, it is hard to ask people who have no money to pay more.

In both Island and San Juan Counties, gas tax revenue helps to support ferries.

[Island County Transportation Issues, Challenges and Priorities](#)

**Action/Follow-up: None.**

## **CITY TRANSPORTATION ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES**

### **City of Mount Vernon**

Mayor Jill Boudreau explained that the City of Mount Vernon is the largest city in Skagit County with a large residential base and a smaller commercial base. During the day the traffic nearly doubles as a result of it being the county seat where social services are available. Skagit Valley College also contributes to traffic congestion. The city wants to make certain that there is a value for its investments. Preservation is a high priority. She provided an overview of local projects that have been completed and conceptual projects.

Issues, challenges and priorities:

- Traffic capacity
- Increased economic vitality
- Value for investment dollars
- Preservation and maintenance

The city has invested in economic vitality in with the downtown/riverfront revitalization project. Phase one provided a floodwall and riverwalk and was completed in 2010. Phase two beginning in 2012 will add more floodwall and riverwalk and a plaza and riverfront park. Phase three will include a floodwall, rivertrail and levees.

The LaVenture/Anderson Road Extension:

- Reduces traffic on College Way (SR 528)
- Reduces traffic congestion on I-5
- Connects an existing interchange to city grid
- Improves access to points east on SR 9

### [City of Mount Vernon Transportation Issues, Challenges and Priorities](#)

#### **City of Oak Harbor**

Home of NAS Whidbey. The 76-year old Deception Pass Bridge is our lifeline. It also carries our water supply from Anacortes, which takes it from the Skagit River.

Top three priorities are:

- SR 20 bottleneck
- Deception Pass bridge
- Washington State Ferries

Oak Harbor assumes that the Sharpes Corner project is a go at this point.

Neither Oak Harbor nor Mt. Vernon has considered a TBD.

**Action/Follow-up: None.**

### **PORT TRANSPORTATION ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES**

#### **Port of Anacortes**

Bob Hyde told the Commission that air traffic at its 3000' airway is down 70% in the recession. Cap Santé Boat Haven is a \$34 million marina investment. It is adjacent to downtown, has an Anthony's restaurant, and a small beach. The marine terminals include Dakota Creek Shipyards, Puget Sound Rope, and a concert center. Dakota Creek invested \$20 million in Project Pier 1 for the ability to have six to eight ships.

#### [Port of Anacortes](#)

#### **Port of Skagit**

Patsy Martin, Executive Director, Port of Skagit, talked about partnerships. The Port of Skagit acquired the airport from Skagit County in 1964-65. Main runway is over 5000' long and expanded service is possible. The airport could handle passenger service but Bellingham handles that need well. Paine Field handles commercial needs, but Port of Skagit sees a niche with general business. One company is looking at transporting fresh vegetables to Alaska and bringing back fish. The Port also has aerospace clients. A Railex project could be a possibility for the Skagit Valley.

Many parties are working together to develop a plan for dredging and maintaining the Swinomish Channel. There are boat building and commercial fisheries ventures along the Swinomish Channel. A dredging fee will be set aside from moorage fees. Also, there has been some exploration of using tolling technology to charge channel users.

### **Ports of Coupeville and South Whidbey Island**

Curt Gordon, a South Whidbey Port Commissioner, spoke for Island County Port Districts. He explained that tourism is becoming a larger part of the Island County economy. Overnight parking is needed at Mukilteo to make better use of passenger capacity on ferries. Island Transit makes it possible for people to walk onto ferries, and with more transit, travelers could leave cars on the mainland and travel to Langley and Coupeville. Port of South Whidbey is looking into passenger ferry service in Saratoga Passage.

City of Mukilteo is taxing parking at 25%, so that is a challenge.

Almost 1000 Island County residents work for Boeing; there is a market for multi-modal ferry improvements.

**Action/Follow-up: None.**

## **PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES**

### **Skagit County Transit (SKAT)**

Transit Chair Ken Dahlstedt talked about SKAT service improvements. Two Park and Rides have been built;

- Chuckanut Drive in Burlington
- Anderson-LaVenture in Mt. Vernon

Local ridership is up 5%. The Tri-County Connector, connecting to the Canadian border and to Everett, has flourished with state support. Ridership is up 17.5% to the north and over 11% to Everett.

The long-distance routes are full and probably can bear fare increases. SKAT has gotten increased sales tax revenue and is looking at fare increases.

### **Island Transit**

Martha Rose, Executive Director, Island Transit, has worked for Island Transit since it began in 1987. She has always worked to build partnerships to connect people to places.

Island Transit collects a .9% sales tax for its operations; it is a fare-free system. For a system of its size, fare collection would not generate usable revenue. Without Island Transit service, WSF would need more boats.

Paratransit service is up 200% over 5 years. The system uses a lot of route deviation and helps to show people how to use the fixed route system.

She suggests the state fund public transit along state highways; have local communities focus on local routes.

WSDOT has partnered with Island Transit in building pullouts on state highways.

**Action/Follow-up: None.**

## **TRIBAL TRANSPORTATION ISSUES, CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES**

### **Samish Tribe**

Nicole Tesch, Manager, Transportation Planning (Interim), Samish Indian Nation, has worked in tribal transportation planning for 10 years. The Samish Tribe thinks outside the box and works in partnership with WSDOT, Skagit County and Island County. It partnered with WSDOT on a safety improvement on SR 20 near Campbell Lake. The tribe owns property near Anacortes and supports the Sharpes Corner project and a Fidalgo Bay Road improvement. Fidalgo Bay Road is the only alternative access into Anacortes, if SR 20 is blocked.

Samish had a transit mobility grant to serve the Anacortes community and tribal members. It gave its van back because it didn't provide enough benefit, given the service frequency provided by SKAT.

**Action/Follow-up: None.**

## **WASHINGTON STATE FERRIES RULE CHANGE**

### **Ferry Tariff Change**

Ray Deardorf, Director, Finance & Planning, Ferries Division, WSDOT Ferries explained the rationale behind eliminating the San Juan reservation fee. One individual commented by email against the action, asserting that commercial tariffs should not be lowered when other fares are increasing.

*The Commission took action unanimously to eliminate the San Juan reservation fee.*

WSF Staff explained work under way to further develop and implement the reservation system. There will be further discussions this fall in the San Juan Islands.

Commissioners also discussed the passenger/vehicle traffic challenge at Friday Harbor. Mayor Lacher, Friday Harbor, said that Congressman Larsen recently provided funding for pedestrian improvements at the Friday Harbor ferry landing to funnel passengers away from the traffic.

### **[WAC 469-300-040 Oversize Vehicle Ferry Tolls](#)**

**Action/Follow-up: None.**

## **REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND WORKING COLLABORATIVELY**

Commissioner Kelly Emerson from Island County talked about the success that Island County has had working with Skagit County. The relationship is important because so much travel from Island County goes through Skagit County. Island County is so pleased with the working relationship with Skagit County that it is working to institutionalize and open communications with Snohomish County.

There is an agreement that federal enhancement funds are divided 60-40, but exceptions are made when necessary. Island County has had conversations with WSDOT about the Deception Pass Bridge and the timeframe for its eventual replacement.

Gordon Rogers, Whatcom COG, reminded the Commission that RTPOs, as planning agencies, bring together local officials from an entire region to collaborate. The Farmhouse Gang has existed for over a dozen years to work on transportation issues beyond RTPO boundaries. It has no authority, but the passion and commitment of those attending helps promote solutions to problems, some requiring money and others not. Sometimes conversation can bring a simple solution. Both the state and the federal government have funded Farmhouse Gang recommendations, such as the Tri-County Connector and the International Mobility and Freight Corridor project. Farmhouse Gang also led the effort for the second train north to Canada.

Where there is a need people can overcome their differences and get things done. In the US-Canada trade corridor discussions, we set aside problems we couldn't do anything about and focused on what we could.

Communication is the key to developing relationships, which develops trust.

Ian Jefeerds, a member of the Ferry Advisory Committee, works for Penn Cove Shellfish. The company has operations in Island, Jefferson and Whatcom Counties. He compliments WSF for its adaptive management of ferry operations. His concern is the long-run future of WSF and capital funding. He suggests revisiting the "Build it in Washington" rule to stretch capital funding farther. He believes changes can keep the jobs in state, but not at the current high costs of ferry construction. He also appreciates the commercial reservation system; his business hurts when a truck must wait two hours in Mukilteo to return home. He would like to see the same energy invested into keeping WSF operating to kickstart the mass transit system in Puget Sound.

Commissioner Dahlstedt ticked off a list of collaborations between Skagit County and other jurisdictions. Anderson-La Venture should provide a diversion from I-5 to SR 9. Swinomish Tribe, Upper Skagit Tribe, City of LaConner, City of Anacortes, Port of Anacortes, US Army Corps of Engineers are among the partners on the Swinomish Channel project. Senator Haugen pointed out that state law was changed to allow Skagit County to spend money on a state road.

James Mastin, Director of Skagit-Island RTPO, explained that regional cooperation is strong because many visitors to the area come to see multiple places in the region. The MPO/RTPO also has a great relationship with the WSDOT Mt. Baker office.

Skagit County redesigned the Guemes Dock to allow the SKAT buses to turnaround at the dock. SKAT is willing to talk more and work with WSF on providing connections to ferry service. One problem is that Anacortes is a small population base.

Lorena Eng, WSDOT Regional Administrator, explained that NW Region is different from others in that there is a sub-region for Skagit, Island, and Whatcom Counties. The Public Works Directors also meet regularly and share information and data.

In Skagit County, 60-70% of its general fund goes to criminal justice. It is asking voters for money to renew EMS for six years.

How can partnerships include the private sector? Gordon Rogers explained that the private sector is so busy taking care of business that they can't break loose to attend meetings. If you want them to partner, you need to reach out to each one. Farmhouse put out 10 kiosks around the four counties to provide information; public-private partnership was suggested but the federal funds did not allow for sponsorship.

In Bakerview, Fred Meyer collaborated with WSDOT, Bellingham and Whatcom County to brainstorm a solution that TIB helped to fund.

The Swinomish Channel dredging needs to be done every 3-4 years. The project beneficiaries are on notice that they need to be saving resources for the next round.

**Action/Follow-up: Summarize and share with RTPOs statewide.**

## **REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON TRANSPORTATION AND THE ECONOMY**

Don Wick, Skagit EDC, talked about the importance of tourism to the economy. There are 6.5 million people within a 100 mile radius of Mt. Vernon.

- More trains between Skagit County and Seattle would be good.
- Timber-based manufacturing, aerospace supply, marine industries, agriculture and food processing
- Moving freight through central Puget Sound is a problem for us here

Ron Nelson, Island EDC, thanked us for building ferries in Washington State. Transportation in Island County comes down to:

- Ferry
- Ferry
- Boat
- Boat

Access on and off Whidbey Island is so important. Tourism is 7% of our economy; 52% of people commute off island to work. In US as a whole, about 38% of the population are senior citizens. In Island County, those percentages are 52% of South Whidbey, 55% of Central Whidbey, and 50% of Camano Island.

Commissioner Wesen is a 4<sup>th</sup> generation dairyman. Dairies buy a lot of feed and sell a lot of milk. About 50% of Darigold product is exported. His dairy pays \$30/ton for hay; it can be shipped to Asia for the same price. Some timber moves on rail, but more could agricultural product could be shipped if there were a local rail spur and distribution center.

BNSF Main Line carries about as much freight tonnage per day as I-5. The BNSF Bridge over the Skagit at Burlington is 100 years old and flood hazard puts both the bridge and levees at risk. When a 100-year flood occurs, the bridge will fail and may take out the I-5 bridge. The bridge is not usable during a flood, but otherwise it is perfectly fine.

City of Burlington has developed an idea of what could be done. It is working with BNSF, which is willing to replace the bridge if it doesn't have to pay. The estimate of PE/NEPA work is \$11 million. Construction cost is about \$80 million.

Island County Tourism slogan is “The Shortest Path to Far Away.” Tourism is up 11% in 2011 over 2010. The challenge is how to protect what people are coming to see. We want to create a cycling culture, but it takes real commitment to make that happen. We are encouraging cyclists to stay off the main road; we need more signage, more shoulders, more trails.

The Whidbey-SeaTac Shuttle not only provides a way to get to the airport, but also a way to travel on-and-off the Island.

Howie Rosenfeld, San Juan County Councilman, said that intermodal connections to SKAT are challenging because the ferry schedule changes four times a year. A reservation system will require scheduling to be completed 6-9 months ahead of time, which should facilitate transit connections.

Higher ferry costs are making the islands more gentrified. There is a 6-hour gap in ferry service the middle of the day. There is the same number of boats and capacity today as there was years ago, despite an increase in San Juan’s population and in tourism. There is a need to solve the car congestion at the top of the hill in Friday Harbor. A new feeder route may need some state funding to match city and county funding.

Scenic byways need better pedestrian and bike access. There are active trails groups on San Juan and Orcas Islands.

Commercial air service in the Skagit-Island RTPO is weak. Service from Bellingham is limited. If commercial service began at Paine Field, it would open a lot of economic development opportunities for South Whidbey and maybe Camano Island.

Senator Haugen asked that the Commission bring policy recommendations to the Legislature.

#### [City of Burlington BNSF Mainline](#)

#### **Action/Follow-up:**

- 1. Share the session findings.**
- 2. Share more policy recommendations with the Legislature.**

#### **PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD**

Paul Locke said that the Federal Transit Agency should be defunded because we can’t afford it. Transit agencies are spending more than they have. The City of Seattle is considering 13 levies over the next 5 years. Reprioritize projects to fit money that is available.

Another speaker from the City of Langley commented on the educational value of today’s sessions. He takes transit every day from Langley to Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center and said that one of the weak links in the intermodal connections is the lack of overnight parking at Mukilteo.

#### **COMMISSION BUSINESS**

Reema Griffith, Executive Director, WSTC, briefed the Commission on the Road User Fee Project and asked the Commission to appoint the Commission Team. *Commissioner Parker moved that Tom Cowan will chair the team and be joined by Anne Haley and Dick Ford. Commissioner Litt seconded the motion which was unanimously approved.*

**TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION**

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PHILIP PARKER, Vice-Chair

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REEMA GRIFFITH, Executive Director

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DATE OF APPROVAL