

**A Two-Phase Study of Attitudes  
Of Washington State Voters  
Toward Transportation Issues**

**Prepared For**

**Washington State Transportation Commission**

**In Conjunction With**

**Cambridge Systematics  
and  
Frank Wilson & Associates**

**by**

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## Methodology

This analysis covers the attitudes of Washington State voters as measured with two research approaches: qualitative focus group research and a quantitative survey.

The first phase was six focus groups conducted as follows:

Group 1	February 21	Bellevue area (11 participants)
Group 2	February 21	Bellevue area (11 participants)
Group 3	February 22	Yakima (10 participants)
Group 4	February 22	Yakima (6 participants)
Group 5	February 23	Vancouver (10 participants)
Group 6	February 23	Vancouver (9 participants)

The second phase was a telephone survey conducted March 8-12. The statewide base sample was 600 registered voters who are licensed drivers, plus an additional 518 overload interviews to produce four data sets:

	Statewide	Overload	Totals
<b>Puget Sound</b>	332	68	<b>400</b>
<b>I-90 Corridor</b>	103	197	<b>300</b>
<b>Vancouver</b>	47	253	<b>300</b>
Rest of state	118	0	118
	<b>600</b>	518	1118

In those instances where findings from the qualitative and the quantitative phases may diverge, more weight should be placed on the quantitative. Not all of the qualitative findings had a counterpart measure in the surveys, so certain findings from the focus groups have to be considered on the merits and analysis of what people said. In almost all cases, however, the same theme had to be mentioned in at least two groups before we concluded that the theme or observation is present among the public as a whole.

We should note especially that focus group findings are useful to reveal the inner workings of how people think but are not statistically projectable to the entire population. The themes arising from the focus group discussions should be viewed in the context of all other findings of this research project and excessive emphasis on the focus group discussion is not warranted.

## Presentation

Analysis of the focus groups and observations in general will use this font.

The analysis of the survey findings will be found in this font.

Where survey findings are displayed in a chart or table, unless otherwise noted, the numbers shown represent the response percentages.

In addition to the findings of the focus groups and the survey, this report will reference, as appropriate, the results of 16 stakeholder interviews with community leaders and interest group representatives conducted by Frank Wilson & Associates between October 13 and November 16, 2005. These will be shown in half-tone boxes such as this when the relevant topics or themes are being discussed.

## Overview

### Context:

- Issues of education, crime and the economy are more important than transportation and traffic congestion.

### Funding

- Most are aware how transportation projects are funded but are split whether gas tax money goes into the general fund or is earmarked.
- The gas tax is generally fair.
- Additional funds are needed, but would not be if government would spend the gas tax efficiently.

### Tolling

- Attitudes toward tolling are split.
  - Tolls can be seen as fair because users pay.
  - Tolls can be seen as unfair because, if government were more efficient with the gas tax, tolls would not be necessary.
- People are aware of HOV lanes, electronic toll collection and, to a lesser extent, HOT lanes.
- An outdated mental picture of tolling systems is hobbling people's acceptance of it in spite of having heard about ETC.
- Conditions for acceptance of tolling include:
  - Applied on a project-by-project basis; there is general apprehension about a statewide tolling system
  - Tolls should be spent on the tolled facility
  - Tolled routes must have alternative free routes
  - Don't toll anything already built

- A statewide tolling system generates apprehension because of its complexity and fears of abuse, fraud and writing a blank check.
- Revenue-generating tolling is preferred over congestion-management tolling.
- Cynicism about government spending blocks acceptance of creative funding approaches.
- Cordon tolling and an annual mileage fee are considered unacceptable and unfair.

### **Specific Areas**

- Puget Sound residents would support converting existing I-405 carpool lanes but resist converting existing lanes into HOT lanes.
- Tolling Snoqualmie Pass should trigger less opposition than putting tolls on other locations.
- Tolls on Columbia River bridges will only be accepted if they are part of a larger traffic circulation plan.

### **Point of Caution**

*The findings represent a snapshot of today's attitudes, not necessarily those that may hold in the future. Concerns raised by the focus group participants and the survey respondents are not impossible to deal with.*

## Analysis

### 1. Of eight issues tested, maintenance of roads and highways ranks fourth most important and traffic congestion is seventh.

When survey respondents were asked to rate issues on a four-point scale of importance ranging from “extremely important” to “not that important”, the three most important issues (where “extremely important” was worth 3 points, “very important” worth 2, etc.) are schools and education, crime and drugs and jobs and the economy. The maintenance of our roads and highways, taxes, environmental issues, and traffic congestion are second tier issues of importance. Illegal immigration has to be considered a third-tier issue.

Issue	Points
Schools & education	218
Crime & drugs	206
Jobs & the economy	205
Maintenance of roads and highways	186
Taxes	184
Environmental issues	176
Traffic congestion	168
Illegal immigration	150

The intensity of importance is quite pronounced between major issues and the transportation issues we are dealing with. As a comparison, 38% said schools and education were extremely important while road maintenance and traffic congestion were about half that.

Those most concerned about the maintenance of roads and highways are college grads, 35-44 year olds and those who feel the system needs additional funds. Those most sensitive about traffic congestion are newer residents, Puget Sound residents, college grads and those who feel the system needs additional funds.

### 2. Government gets only lukewarm scores for the way it is handling transportation issues.

Of three issues tested, government’s handling of the state’s economy gets slightly better approval scores (56% approve to 39% disapprove) than its handling of traffic congestion (42%-50%) and how it is “using transportation funds to maintain and build our transportation system for the future” (47%-

46%). Looking at the intensity of the feelings, twice as many people strongly disapprove than strongly approve of the way government is handling the economy and five times as many strongly disapprove rather than strongly approve of the way it is handling traffic congestion. This reflects the normal complaints about government in general, but especially an intensity about traffic congestion that does not appear when people are simply asked its level of importance. In other words, traffic may not be the most important thing on their minds, but when it *is* on their minds, they are not happy.

Highest disapproval of the way the state is handling traffic congestion occurs, no surprise, in the Puget Sound region and among 35-44 year olds (a very mobile segment of society), post grads, those who feel the system needs additional funding, western Washington in general and high occupancy households.

The most important transportation-related issues for stakeholders were safety, economy, congestion relief, fairness and tolling.

The stakeholders took special note of the relationship between transportation and economic well being. An efficient transportation system and the ability to move product to market is critical to the economy and future of the state. The need to accelerate projects through toll financing should be explained to the citizenry in terms of economic benefits and not only the benefits of greater personal mobility.

### **3. Cars and traffic dominate the mental picture when the transportation issue is mentioned.**

To warm up the focus group participants and get an idea of the context in which they view transportation issues, I asked them at the beginning of each group what picture comes to mind if someone says the phrase “transportation in the State of Washington.” The picture was primarily one of cars and traffic, but there was also a decent number of comments about light rail, buses and other mass transit. Bridges and ferries were a minor part of the picture.

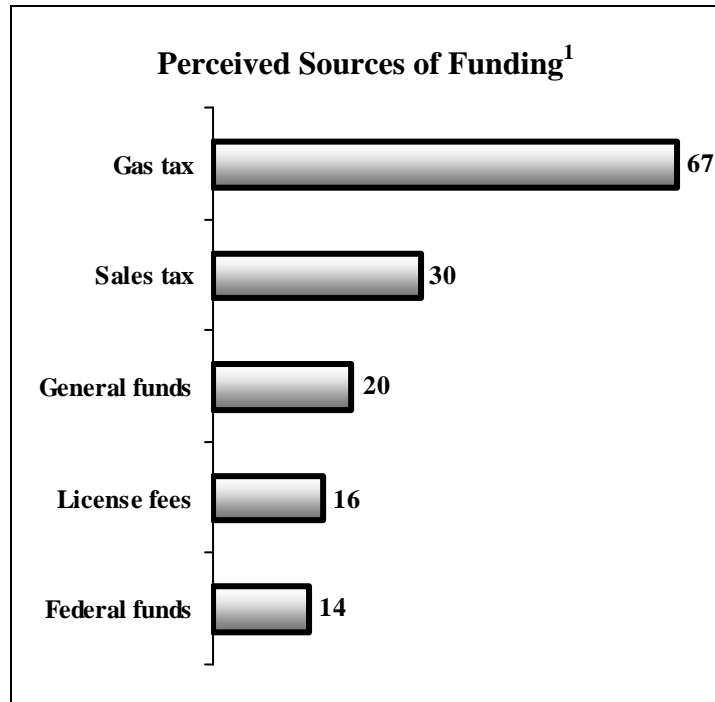
### **4. Most people are aware of the major source of transportation funding.**

The gas tax was invariably the first answer when focus group participants were asked where the money comes from to fund the state’s transportation system. When pushed for other sources, they mentioned federal funds, license fees, vehicle registration fees, tonnage fees, sales tax, developer fees, road mitigation fees, and even cigarette taxes as sources of funding.

Overall, the satisfaction level with the way the state is collecting funds and paying for transportation projects was rated slightly above an 8 on a 10-point scale – a solid B grade – among the two otherwise cynical Bellevue groups.

When the survey respondents were asked an open-ended question on this same issue – where do funds come from to pay for transportation projects in the state – over half mentioned gasoline tax as the first answer out of their mouths and two-thirds volunteered it is a source of funds in this multi-mention question. No other answer came close.

Highest awareness that the gas tax is the prime source of funding occurs among those who know the gas tax is dedicated to transportation needs, those would raise the gas tax for additional funds, 45-54 year olds, men, higher occupancy households, and those opposed to tolling for either revenue or traffic management.



## 5. The state is split in its understanding of how gas tax funds are used.

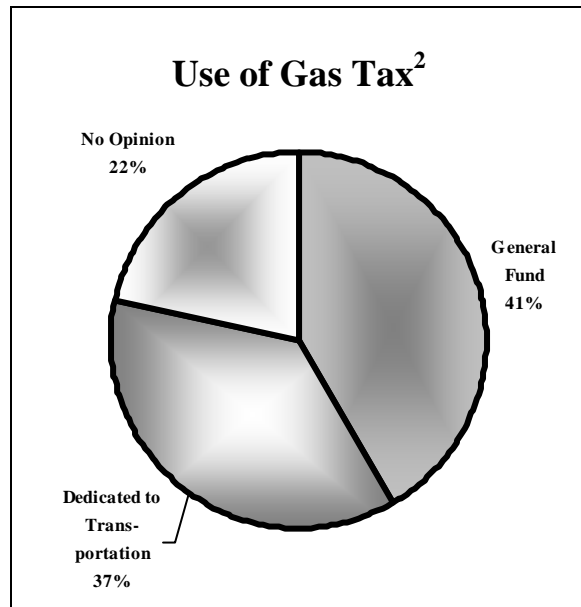
By a 41-37 margin, people are more of the opinion that gas tax funds go into the state's general fund to be used as the legislature determines than they are of the opinion that gas tax funds are dedicated to transportation projects.

<sup>1</sup> To the best of your knowledge, where do the funds come from to pay for transportation projects in the state ... things such as road construction and maintenance? Please name as many as you are aware of. (All numbers are percentages unless otherwise identified.)



Those most likely to believe that the gas tax is diverted to general funds include such groups as 35-44 year olds, people in the I-90 corridor, three-vehicle households, Vancouver, long-time residents and eastern Washington.

Those who are most sure that the gas tax has to be used for transportation projects include post grads, 55-64 year olds, those who would raise the gas tax if more funds are needed, those aware of tolling as a tool for traffic management, and single-person households.



**6. Most believe theirs is a money-exporting area.**

Quite consistently, participants in the focus groups thought that their gas taxes went to help fund projects in other parts of the state more than taxes from other people came to help them. Only in the second Yakima group did the participants second-guess their initial we're-not-getting-our-fair-share position.

This is not an unusual pattern; we see it all the time in perceptions of which state gets the most return on federal tax dollars. It is human nature to think that the other guy is getting the free ride. Nonetheless, we should at least be aware of this mother-loves-you-more-than-me pattern when messages to various populations are crafted. The key, as the stakeholders brought out, is to broaden their horizons so that transportation projects are seen in the totality of the movement of people and goods. The economic benefit to the whole state is how the issue must be framed. Otherwise, you will constantly be battling parochialism.

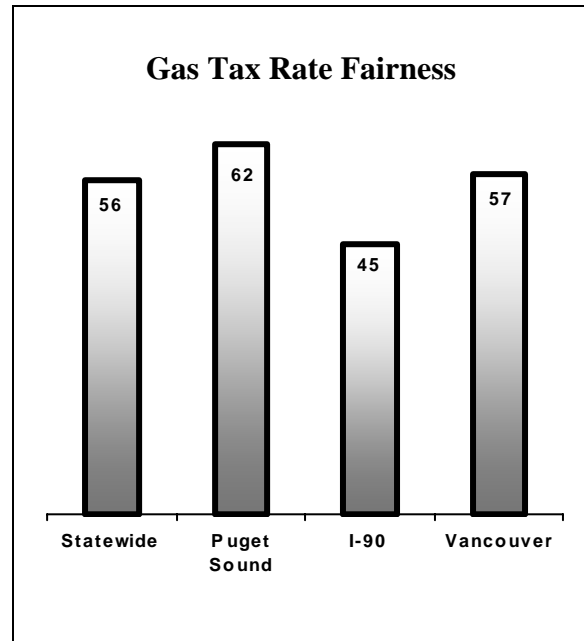
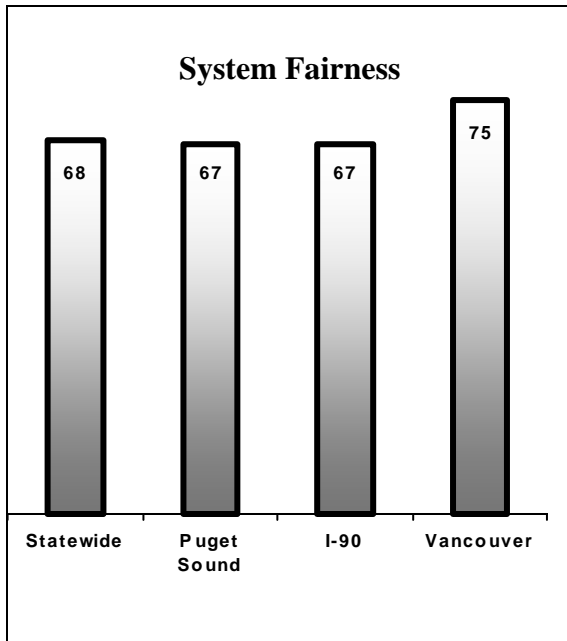
*“We export tax dollars to the eastern part of the state.” (Man, Bellevue)*

*“The majority of funds go to King County.” (Man, Bellevue)*

<sup>2</sup> From what you understand about it, do gas tax funds go into the state’s general fund to be used as the legislature determines, or are they dedicated to fund only transportation projects?

**7. The gas tax system is seen as more fair than the gas tax rate, but majorities think both are more fair than not.<sup>3</sup>**

By a 68-28 margin, the gas tax system for funding highway projects is fair rather than unfair, and by a 56-40 margin, the current gas tax rate is fair. The 28% and 40% minorities can, of course, be vociferous in their opinions.

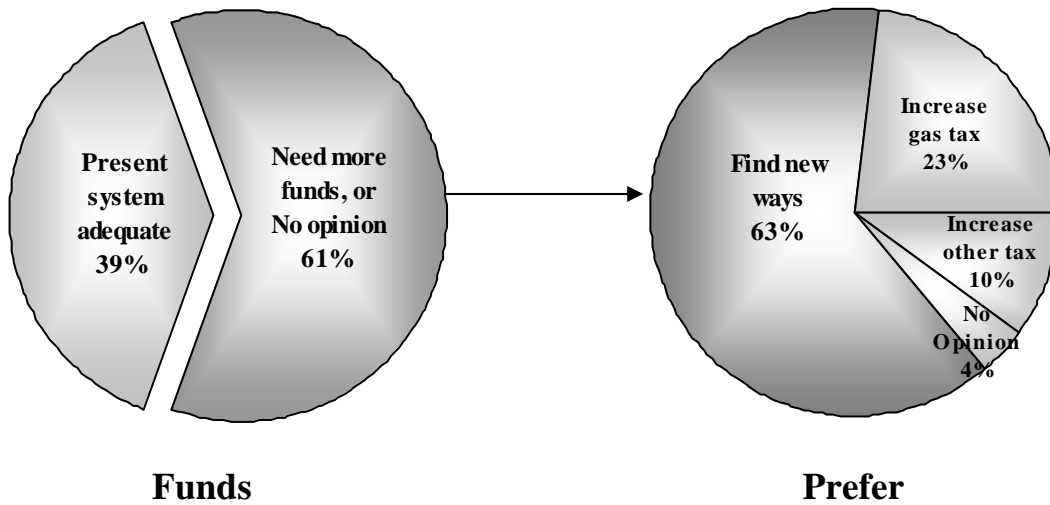


**8. A slight majority feels that additional funds beyond the present system need to be raised to build and maintain the transportation system.**

A slight majority of 51% feels that more funds need to be raised than will be raised in the near future by the present system of taxes and fees. In contrast, 39% of the population feel the present system is adequate. Those who said more funds are needed were then asked what they would prefer the state do – increase the gas tax, increase other taxes or find new ways.

<sup>3</sup> As you may recall, the gasoline or fuel tax is the major provider of funds for state highway projects, with lesser amounts coming from other sources. Do you feel that the gas tax [system for funding highway projects / rate] is ... very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair or very unfair?

## Adequate or Not<sup>4</sup>



Whether the recognition for additional funds is correlated with a willingness to provide those funds is, of course, another question. It is interesting to note that of the 61% of the population that either said we need to raise additional funds or had no opinion, only a third were in favor of raising taxes (23% favor raising the gasoline tax and 10% favor raising other taxes). Because we gave them a third option – find news ways of paying for our transportation system – 63% (or 38% of the total statewide sample) chose that category. When they were asked what new ways they feel should be considered, here are the answers given by at least 3% of those eligible to answer the question:

<sup>4</sup> Do you feel that the present system of raising funds for transportation projects is adequate to meet our transportation system needs, or do you feel that additional funds need to be raised to build and maintain our transportation system? [If more funds, or if no opinion:] To raise additional funds, would you prefer that the state ... increase the gasoline tax, ... increase other taxes, or ... find new ways of paying for our transportation system.

News Ways to Consider <sup>5</sup>	Percentage of Those Eligible to Answer
No opinion	27
Toll roads and toll bridges	21
Better budgeting of funds	9
Alcohol & tobacco taxes	5
Corporate & industry taxes	5
Lottery	5
Cut government salaries	4
User fees	4
Income tax	4
Donations & contributions	3
New taxes	3

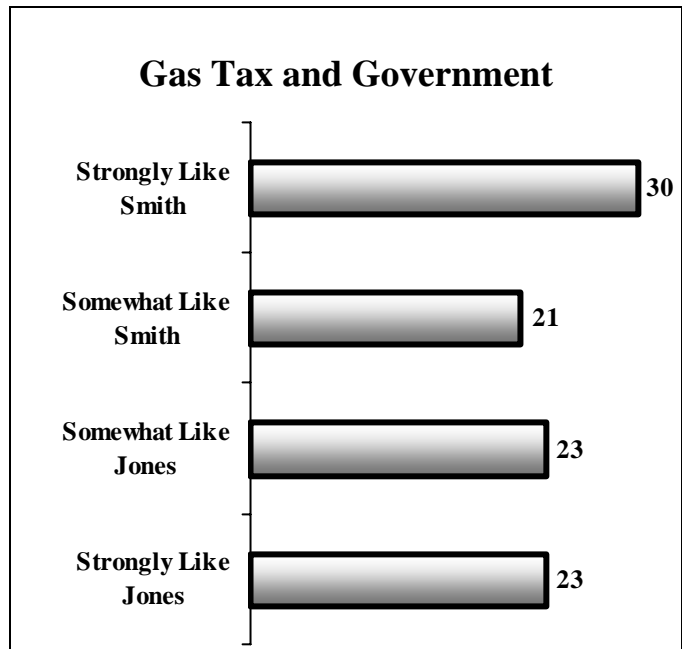
What is interesting is that a fifth of those in this particular attitudinal boat volunteered on their own that they would welcome toll roads and/or toll bridges. The other themes are spending reductions and increasing taxes already in place.

**9. A slight majority believes the gas tax would be sufficient if government were more efficient.**

If voters are asked if the present system of raising funds (mainly the gas tax) for transportation projects is adequate to meet our needs, only 39% say yes and 51% say additional funds need to be raised. But if one injects government spending practices into the mix, then the picture reverses and 51% say the gas tax would be a sufficient source of funds if government would use the money efficiently. The attitude was measured using a Smith-Jones format: “Smith says that the gasoline tax provides adequate funds for our transportation needs if government would use the money efficiently.” “Jones says the gasoline tax does not provide adequate funds for our transportation needs even if government were more efficient. He feels more funding must be found if Washington State is to have a quality transportation system.” The results, as shown in the accompanying chart, give the edge to the Smith position 51-46.

<sup>5</sup> And what do you feel are some new ways that should be considered?

At its bare bones simplest, people sense the gas-tax funding model is not keeping up with needs. But give them a reason not to have to pony up the extra money from their own pockets, such as suggesting that government would have enough money if it used the funds more efficiently, and enough people clamber on board that bandwagon to constitute a majority, albeit a slight one. If the transportation system is judged just as it stands, more people than not would say it needs more funds. But if the issue is framed up or down on government spending patterns, then the story has a different ending.



**10. Tolling as a potential source of funding came up early in two focus groups, but was not initially an idea on the top of most people’s minds.**

Tolling as a viable option came up unaided (once in Yakima and once in Vancouver) only when I asked the participants to imagine that residents were lined up on the state’s borders and in a manner akin to the Oklahoma land rush were ready to swoop in, claim land, build cities and establish a transportation system. Under these hypothetical conditions, tolling came up unaided in the two groups mentioned, but in general the gas tax is the first funding source thought of.

When the idea of tolling occurred to the participants unaided, it was seen only as a means of generating revenue, not as a means for traffic management.

*“Our tax structure is taxed to the maximum, except for tolls.” (Man, Yakima)*

*“I do not want it to be a source of continuing state revenue.” (Man, Yakima)*

Stakeholders felt that tolling is the way of the future – that it is inevitable and there is no other way to build what we need. The stakeholders felt that acceptance of tolling among the general public will take time, that the state should do some pilot or demonstration projects first, such as the Tacoma Narrows Bridge and SR 167.

## **11. The vast majority of voters have used toll roads, toll bridges and HOV lanes.**

When 84% have driven on a toll road, 89% have used a toll bridge, and 88% have used HOV lanes, penetration of such ideas and practices has to be considered virtual saturation. In the case of HOV lanes, 62% of those who are aware of them strongly approve and 25% somewhat approve; only 11% disapprove.

## **12. Tolls trigger a mixed reaction.**

With a couple of exceptions, most participants' first reaction to the idea of tolls was negative. But as the conversation went on, they moderated their position and began to admit that there might be a place for them.

A few people mentioned toll roads they have driven on both in the U.S. and abroad. They praised their beauty (Florida) and prompt roadside service (Mexico), among other traits. After they took their first potshots at tolls, it seems they wanted to be fair to those who favor them and, therefore, looked for reasons why they, themselves, might support them under certain conditions. Those conditions were:

- The money collected has to be applied to the facility or project at hand
- There have to be alternative cost-free routes in case one can't pay the toll
- Don't toll anything already built

Obviously, the values expressed with these conditions are the need for control, the need for freedom and the need to be respected – the need for reassurance that the government is not disrespecting the people by double billing.

The specific tolling locations or ideas that gained the most favor in the focus groups were (1) Snoqualmie Pass, (2) a new bridge in Vancouver, and (3) HOT lanes where there are underutilized HOV lanes. The reasons for favoring the first two are because they are one of a kind and they are such big-ticket items. Other options to getting across the Columbia or across the Snoqualmie Pass are fewer and less attractive, and doing anything in this regard is seen automatically to cost big dollars, whereas introducing a HOT lane in some location is not that big of a deal and will not be a big ticket item in the normal sense.

One thing in favor of tolls for a new bridge is that state residents have a history of paying for bridges with tolls, or paying relatively larger amounts to cross bodies of water with the ferries. In the second Bellevue group, few had ever crossed the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, but they were unanimously in favor of tolling for the new

TNB. The reason: friends, relatives and others would have a benefit of it even though they themselves might not. It was the one aberration in the groups from the usual what's-in-it-for-me approach and is instructive as to when magnanimity might kick in – with visible, big-ticket items for which there are few alternatives.

In short, Snoqualmie Pass improvements and a new bridge at over the Columbia are tolling naturals.

*“Toll roads definitely serve a purpose. They may be extremely unpopular, but there’s a place for them.” (Man, Vancouver)*

*“Tolling existing roads would be like paying for them twice.” (Man, Bellevue)*

*“I’m not in favor of tolls on highways already built, but in favor of building a new bridge and putting a toll on it.” (Woman, Vancouver)*

*“[Tolls okay] as long as toll roads are constructed new, not taking over roads that we paid for already.” (Man, Bellevue)*

*“I’m all for tolls in any conditions as long as it’s not compulsory.” (Man, Bellevue)*

*“Most would agree with a toll if it’s reasonable and temporary.” (Woman, Vancouver)*

Stakeholders indicated that bridges have traditionally been tolled and it may be the only natural way to pay for them. Projects with a clear need and conditions that make tolling practical were mentioned.

The projects that received the most frequent mentions as tolling candidates were:

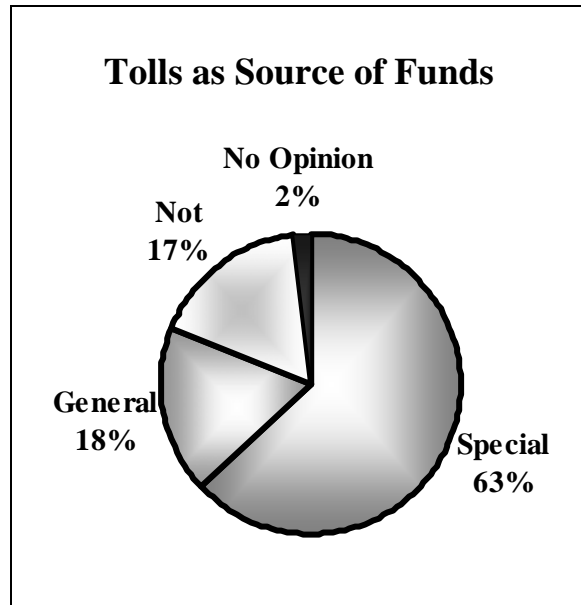
- SR 520 and I-90 bridges, with SR 520 mentioned most frequently because of urgent safety issues
- SR 167 HOT lanes
- I-5 through Seattle with special mention of the Convention Center problem (i.e. the convention center built on the air rights over the freeway making expansion virtually impossible)
- I-405 for its entire length
- I-90 additional capacity from Lake Washington across Snoqualmie Pass
- Columbia River bridges

- A new north-south corridor through eastern Puget Sound linking Kent and Everett, possibly as a TOT (Truck-Only Toll) project

### **13. Tolls are acceptable as a source of funds if considered mainly for special project-by-project situations.**

The statewide respondents were asked: “As a general matter, do you feel that tolls ... should be considered as a general source of transportation revenue in Washington State, ... should be considered only in special project-by-project situations or should never be considered?”

This finding that 63% of the people prefer tolls be considered only in special project-by-project situations verifies the often-heard comments in the focus groups that tolls should be directly applied to a particular need, and it ties in with the user-pays belief many of the participants expressed.



### **14. For some people, tolling is a solution to a problem they do not believe exists.**

To reach our focus group research objectives, we framed the issue in terms of financing and voters’ satisfaction with the financial methods of constructing and maintaining the state’s transportation system. We did not start the discussions by asking participants whether they felt there was a funding shortfall for growing, improving and maintaining the system. To have done so might have conditioned the participants and precluded certain lines of questioning.

Nonetheless, the topic surfaced unaided in most groups and some participants questioned whether a financing problem truly existed or whether tolling was simply a disguised way of increasing revenues for use on transportation projects in other parts of the state or, worse, on non-transportation issues. Cynicism is alive and well in and around discussions of tolling.

Those who eat and breathe transportation problems are far down the road of finding additional financial resources to solve them, but they first need to convince the public



that the problems are real and the funding sparse before people will think seriously about one or more of the alternative financing methods under consideration.

*“If this [tolling] is a thinly veiled way of extracting money from people, it won’t go over very well.” (Man, Bellevue)*

*“I don’t believe tolls will be used to make improvements. They’ll go to the general fund.” (Man, Bellevue)*

The stakeholders do not share this denial of the problem. They know the true status of the funding apparatus and see tolling as the way of the future.

Communicating with the public about tolling is important. Not only is there an information void about how modern toll-collection systems work, there is little knowledge about tolling for congestion management purposes. The comprehensive tolling study is a good vehicle to initiate a discussion about tolling in all its forms. The Tacoma Narrows Bridge and SR 167 projects are viewed by the stakeholders as good test cases from which people can learn the practical side of how tolling works.

#### **15. People are evenly split between the universal-payment philosophy and the user-pays philosophy.**

The first philosophy is that certain services should be provided regardless of how evenly they are used by various public segments. Schools are the prime example where senior citizens who, for example, never had children are nonetheless expected to pay the same tax rate as a household with half a dozen kids in school.

The second philosophy is that those who use a publicly provided good should be the prime, or perhaps only, payers for that good or service. The participants in the focus groups swung back and forth between the two with each philosophy getting in its blows. No consensus emerged.

While most people found the user-pays argument to be a reasonable and strong argument in favor of tolls, there were some (particularly a group in Vancouver) who felt that the gas tax was more fair because they could choose what type of car to drive and how often, and hence a smaller car would use less gas and therefore pay less in taxes.

*“All have the opportunity to use roads. They may not use them now, but will in the future. We need to help each other out, whether east or west. ... It can’t be user-dictated exclusively.” (Woman, Bellevue)*

*“You cannot support roads specifically by tolls; you have to have a gas tax as well. Tax money should be used for all.” (Woman, Yakima)*

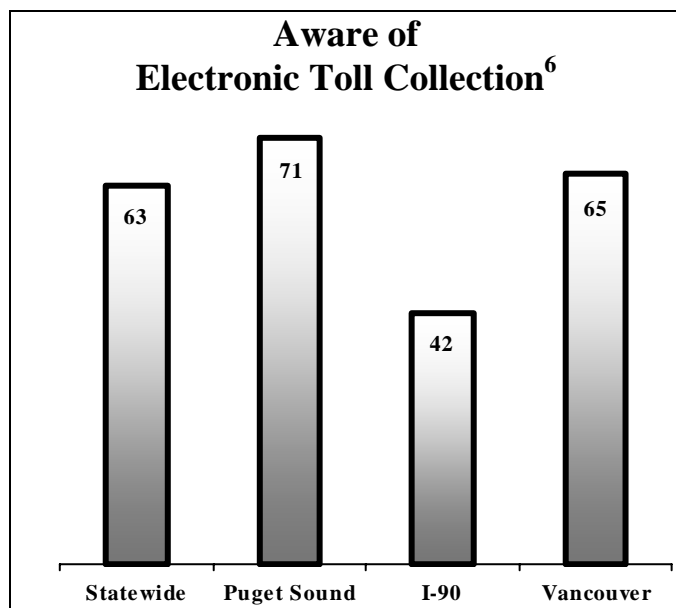
*“If you use the I-5 bridge, you pay for it.” (Man, Vancouver)*

*“The gas tax seems appropriate: those who buy the most gas use the roads the most.” (Man, Vancouver)*

## **16. A solid majority is aware of electronic toll collection.**

The explanation of electronic toll collection was presented to the survey respondents as follows: “Some toll roads and bridges have a system where a driver is not required to stop at a toll booth but continues driving at full highway speeds while a scanner reads a transponder, or electronic device, in the car and deducts the toll from a pre-paid account.” With this as the reminder, then five out of eight voters statewide claimed they were aware of it.

However, even with this claimed awareness, it was obvious in the focus groups that the new picture has not fully taken root and that people still visualize the old toss-the-coins-in-the-basket routine.



## **17. Awareness of HOT lanes is relatively low but among those who are aware, more than three out of five approve.**

A split-sampled question was read to half of the sample as follows:

*“Have you ever heard of HOT lanes, that is, H-O-T or high-occupancy toll lanes, where carpools use the lanes for free and solo drivers can*

<sup>6</sup> Some toll roads and bridges have a system where a driver is not required to stop at a toll booth but continues driving at full highway speeds while a scanner reads a transponder, or electronic device, in the car and deducts the toll from a pre-paid account. Have you heard or read anything about this system of toll collection?

choose to use the lanes for a toll? The toll would vary based on the number of cars in the toll lanes to keep the lanes free flowing.”

The second half of the sample heard the same wording with the following phrase tacked on at the end:

“...and give everyone an opportunity for a faster, reliable trip when they really need it.”

Those who said they were aware were then asked whether they strongly approve, somewhat approve, somewhat disapprove or strongly disapprove of H-O-T lanes. The results show that gilding the lily adds about four percentage points to the approve column.

	Aware	Strongly Approve	Somewhat Approve	Somewhat Disapprove	Strongly Disapprove
SS1: Basic	30	21	40	13	21
SS2: Extra Reasons	36	32	33	11	21

Even more important, the extra phrasing about a faster, reliable trip improves the intensity of the approval rating by 11 percentage points. This shows that the public’s attitudes are semi-fluid on the issue and open to be persuaded, within bounds, of the value of pricing for traffic management.

**18. An outdated mental picture of tolling systems is hobbling people’s acceptance of it.**

Say the word “tollroad” to the average person and he or she will visualize a Chicago-style toll booth with a basket to throw coins into and a mile-long backup. Although the majority claimed to have heard of, or even seen a friend in another state use, electronic toll collection, they are not yet freed from the image of old, low-grade technology.

They lack a compelling visual. If they could be shown a simple video illustration (driven, of course, by sufficient exposure) of how ETC traffic flows through unimpeded while cash payers have to pull to a *side* toll plaza, it would clear up a lot of distortion. Even a still photo would help. The state will never make requisite progress with any tolling idea until the old pictures have been driven from the public’s collective mind so that tolls are seen as an enhancer of traffic flow rather than a hindrance.

The lack of an accurate visual also affected people’s perceptions of HOT lanes. Everyone has seen people driving across the single white line that usually separates

an HOV lane from a general purpose lane, so some assumed a HOT lane is just an HOV lane with another name and no particular physical differences, and wondered how the state will keep people from sneaking in. The physical layout has to be shown to them.

*“I’d pay an extra \$2 to drive in the HOT lane. Maybe \$3 or \$4.” (Woman, Yakima)*

### **19. People are more apt to visualize tolling as a traffic-slowing rather than a traffic-flowing mechanism.**

This is very much related to the picture they carry in their heads of toll booths and baskets where traffic spreads out over multiple lanes at a toll plaza that stretches from one side of the freeway to the other, and everyone has to go past a toll booth. Again, the Chicago picture of “a mass of cars at the toll booths.” Add to this the perception that one has to stop at another toll plaza every three or four miles and it’s little wonder that tolling (pricing) is not perceived as a traffic-freeing system.

Even when others mentioned that many states have a FastPass or EZ-Pass option, most still visualized vehicles having to go through a toll plaza structure instead of traveling on free-flowing lanes significantly distanced from a toll plaza.

The fears they connected with this stereotype were the normal ones: they (or, worse, someone in the car ahead of them) would not have the change, the basket would not count it right, someone would use the pause to ask the toll booth attendant for directions, and so forth.

*“I worry about the guy from Seattle who takes a wrong turn and doesn’t have the money or a transponder.” (Man, Vancouver)*

*“[Tolls] slow down traffic even with the electronic system.” (Man, Vancouver)*

*“I can’t see stopping to pay a toll.” (Man, Vancouver)*

*“I don’t like the stop and go of the toll system.” (Man, Yakima)*

*“If it doesn’t slow traffic, it would be worth it.” (Man, Vancouver)*

### **20. Announcements of tolling projects will stimulate a wide variety of questions and concerns.**

About a third of the way into the focus group discussions, I passed out a hypothetical newspaper article that “announced” that the state plans to toll I-405, Snoqualmie Pass and a new Vancouver crossing (a copy of which is found in the appendix of this report). The participants were given time to read the 800-word article and then were asked to write the questions that the article triggered – things they would want to

know as a result of receiving the information. This exercise builds on the idea that questions are windows on people's concerns which in turn are precursors to their fears which in turn are building blocks of opposition. With that as prelude, here are the categories of questions that were written down by at least three people across the groups:

**Most Frequently Asked Questions  
About the Hypothetical Newspaper Article  
By Focus Group  
(Number of Mentions)**

Questions	Blv 1	Blv 2	Yak 1	Yak 2	Van 1	Van 2	Totals
Amount of toll (\$.50-\$8.00)	1	4	4	2	4	4	19
Fee fairness / Now and later	2	4	4	2	2	2	16
Tolls vs occupants per car	3	2	1	2	4	3	15
Status of gas tax	4	3	2		1	2	12
Use of toll revenue	3	2	3	2	1		11
Annual mileage fee		5	1		1	4	11
Tolls effect traffic reduction	5	1	1	3			10
HOV lanes	3		2	2	1		8
Toll collection process	2	3		1			6
Mass Transit	2				2	1	5
Other funding sources avail	1	1		1	1	1	5
Locations chosen	1	1				2	4
Affect on other nearby states	1	2			1		4
Consideration for commuters	1	2			1		4
HOT lanes		1		1	1	1	4
Lane enforcement		1		1		2	4
Future solutions	1	1			1		3
Other success stories	2			1			3
Construction period	2				1		3
Toll station locations	3						3
Reduce spending; no tolls	1				1	1	3
Safety considerations	1		2				3
Timeline		1	1	1			3
Additional lanes		3					3
Motorcycles - Use / Safety		1	1		1		3
Tolling: existing vs new		2	1				3
Trucks / Buses / # of wheels			2		1		3
Urban Area					1	2	3

More detailed explanations of the comments are found in the text below.

A full listing of the verbatim questions can be found in the appendix of this report and a reading of them will convey the tone that was present in the focus groups. As can be seen, there were questions about every single topic in the newspaper article. Here are examples of their question phrasing about the seven most frequently mentioned items:

<i>Amount of toll</i>	How much is the toll / why so large a difference on I-405: \$.50 to \$8.00 / why such a wide gap / why does the toll vary so drastically / will the tolls be higher at first to pay for the build and then reduced to cover only the annual maintenance expenses?
<i>Fee fairness</i>	Roads could be built to last much longer for less money / tolls seem too high / how long will the tolls be there / would this be indicative of future improvement funding; would the state just start a new toll every time it needs funding for transportation / two or more [occupants] should pay something; not a free system / it's hard if you work each day and drive I-405; would there be a reduced rate / why shouldn't everyone pay the toll / do you get charged 8 bucks because someone screwed up [car breakdown]?
<i>Tolls versus occupants</i>	I-405: why are carpoolers getting off scot free / can you effectively manage one person cars in a HOT lane / why should only the one-occupant drivers have to pay; everyone is using it / carpoolers – how would you know; occupants – who would qualify / how would allowing two passengers or more not paying give the state the revenue they need?
<i>Status of gas tax</i>	What about gas taxes / instead of the gas tax / should we take a look at existing spending from gas tax and make sure we are spending efficiently / if toll roads, would gas tax decrease or be additional / is the gas tax actually being used for roads / is this actually for improvements or a solution to get rid of gas tax / how is the gas tax money currently used / is this going to be instead of the gas tax or in addition to?
<i>Use of toll revenue</i>	What would tolls be used for / \$.50 to \$8.00 is way too much leeway to give the fee controllers for anything; looking to the future, Big Brother is there / where is the money going – directly to that city / how is it dispersed / what are the assurances that the money goes for the road maintenance / would tolls just be used for upkeep on existing bridge or other roads / how can “politics” be avoided in the distribution of various new road revenues?
<i>Annual mileage fee</i>	How would it be done if they were to eliminate the gas tax and fund it by the number of miles driven / seems unfair to people who have green cars / how could they tell how many miles a person drives in a year?

*Effect on traffic* Too high a cost on toll prices; still does not take care of congestion / would a toll really reduce traffic / is this an effective traffic management tool in other states / would [tolls] slow traffic down more / would toll decrease traffic / should congestion be considered for amount of toll / what studies are being done on cost effectiveness of supposed traffic solution of tolls?

Some of the questions in this exercise are simply harmless attempts to build a store of information – how do things work, what will the physical layout be, what will it cost, and so forth. And then there are the questions that mask concerns – is it fair, will it work, how much change will there be, who will benefit – in short, will I like the outcome? These indicate deeper values that must be addressed, as will be analyzed in the following sections.

## **21. People want reassurance that new ideas will work before they will be supportive.**

The main example is the effect of tolls on traffic. Their questions show a bit of doubt on the surface, but underneath there is strong hope that the idea could work to relieve traffic congestion. They want it to work (given their complaints about traffic congestion, who wouldn't?) and are asking for proof – a track record somewhere that others have tried it and pricing is an effective tool to manage traffic.

*“Can we take a look at some other successful plans with toll roads and see what they did to make them successful?” (Woman, Bellevue)*

*“What has worked for other countries and states?” (Man, Yakima)*

## **22. Pricing for traffic management is not a concept near the tops of their minds.**

Before the idea was presented in the newspaper article, tolls as a traffic management tool did not come up spontaneously in the focus groups. Almost all of the discussions about tolling focused on such things as the physical structures, the costs, what might go wrong (ETC mistakes), etc. The closest participants came to discussing unaided any aspect of traffic management was when they mused about the time they might save. While a few saw the advantage of having the car in front of them take a HOT lane, they still did not go to the next step and see tolls – more correctly, pricing – as a deliberate way of managing traffic, at least not until we put the idea on the table.

In a couple of groups, I allowed the discussion about tolling to continue for awhile and then shifted focus by asking them how they felt the state was doing managing traffic. They dutifully gave their opinions. But even though I butted these two topics

up against each other, the participants still did not make the bridge that tolls could possibly be used as a traffic management tool. In the second Bellevue group they still didn't get it even after I suggested the connection. As far as they were concerned, we had just had two separate discussions; they did not grasp the link.

Until the idea of tolls-as-traffic-management is more in play in water-cooler and work-bench conversations, the public is not ready for a debate on its merits.

The second Yakima group voiced a suspicion about it using their perceptions of gas prices. They claimed that when gas prices go up, they do not see a correlative decrease in the number of cars on the road. Hence, and it was the consensus, they thought that tolls would not decrease the number of cars either.

As for incentives to go into work earlier or later to take advantage of varying toll prices, some said they did not have the luxury of flextime.

*"Many of us are stuck with when we drive to work." (Woman, Bellevue)*

*"The toll is not just to cover cost; it's to control behavior." (Man, Vancouver)*

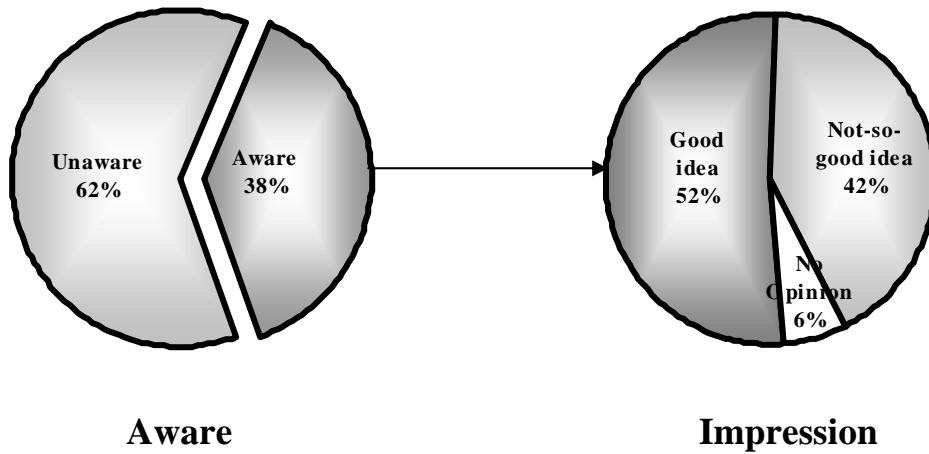
The stakeholders familiar with the concept of congestion management thought it is a fair way to add capacity to existing roads. They believe it is a low-cost, practical way to fix existing roads – and it represents a choice. Those who were unfamiliar with congestion management had a harder time imagining how it would work, but liked the idea if it could show itself to work in certain environments.

**23. In the survey, claimed aided awareness of pricing for traffic management is a respectable 38% and a majority of those people think it's a good idea.**

The respondents in the statewide survey were asked: "Have you heard or read anything about tolling roads or bridges as a way to shift traffic patterns and spread out road usage by charging higher tolls when there is a lot of traffic and lower tolls when there is less traffic?" Those who claimed to be aware of this management tool were then asked: "From what you understand about it, does this strike you as a good idea or a not-so-good idea?"



## Pricing for Traffic Management



Claimed awareness is highest among Vancouver residents, 45-54 year olds, higher education, men and western Washington. Those most likely to view it as a good idea include the I-90 corridor residents, college grads, eastern Washington, younger residents and seniors.

### 24. Suspicion of hidden beneficiaries will always accompany change.

Another values example, as with all ideas that involve change, is the concern that someone else might be a hidden beneficiary, the change-producing concept itself being only a mask, a front. That “someone else” might be a city in the next county that is using toll revenue from other counties to benefit its own citizens. Or, more problematic, that toll money might be used for general purpose government programs not related to transportation. Again, it is better to address such concerns while they are still nascent and *before* the problem enjoys majority status. People’s attitudes toward such other issues as pricing, use of the revenues, and fairness are also in this state of attitudinal fluidity and, therefore, susceptible to being influenced.

Suspicion even came up about Snoqualmie Pass. A participant in Yakima claimed that because of bills pending the legislature, “The more DOT keeps the pass closed this winter, the better for chances of bill passage.” An interesting example of linkage and suspicions.

*“The legislature should have hands off. They have a way of getting in there and spending money on other stuff. [Tolls] should be for transportation only.”  
(Man, Vancouver)*

## 25. Fairness is a multi-faceted value.

Fairness, another value that will be in play, came up in the discussions in three ways: is it fair for the low-income or fixed-income driver, and is it fair to allow solo drivers to pay to use HOT lanes, is it fair as a general source of revenue? There was significant confusion, even distortion, on the HOT lanes. Rather than see better usage of HOV lanes by converting them to HOT lanes and allowing solo drivers to use them for a toll, some objected saying that if it's a lane that collects a toll from anyone, it should collect a toll from every user of it.

*"Why shouldn't everyone pay the toll and not just the single drivers?"  
(Woman, Vancouver)*

As has been found in many other focus groups about HOT lanes, there is an initial tendency to view them as unfair to low-income and fixed-income drivers – "... they want to go places, too." That first-blush impression was also present in the first Bellevue group, but it ended up with a twist in this exchange:

*Woman: "I'm thinking of low-income people. The people in the \$100,000 BMWs will be whizzing by them."*

*Man: "If people driving BMWs are willing to buy me a new road, fine."*

As for fairness in terms of using tolls as a general source of revenue to be used elsewhere, one man had this insight, but this argument did not sway the rest from their "spend it here" stance:

*"There are projects that benefit specific groups of people; they should be paid for by them. Then there are projects that benefit the state in general – commerce that goes across the mountains, for example. The state has to maintain the projects that affect and benefit the state in general. But if it's specific benefits to specific people, let them pay for it." (Man, Bellevue)*

A man in the second Yakima group said, "The Snoqualmie Pass toll should not be used for the Alaskan Viaduct." The people in the first Yakima group brought up a different example:

*"We all had to pay for that new stadium and people over here didn't think that was fair. People say I'm not using it so why should I pay for it?" (Woman, Yakima)*

In answer to the question of what is fair, a man and a woman in the second Bellevue group had this to say:

*Woman: "If you use it, you pay for it; that's fair."*

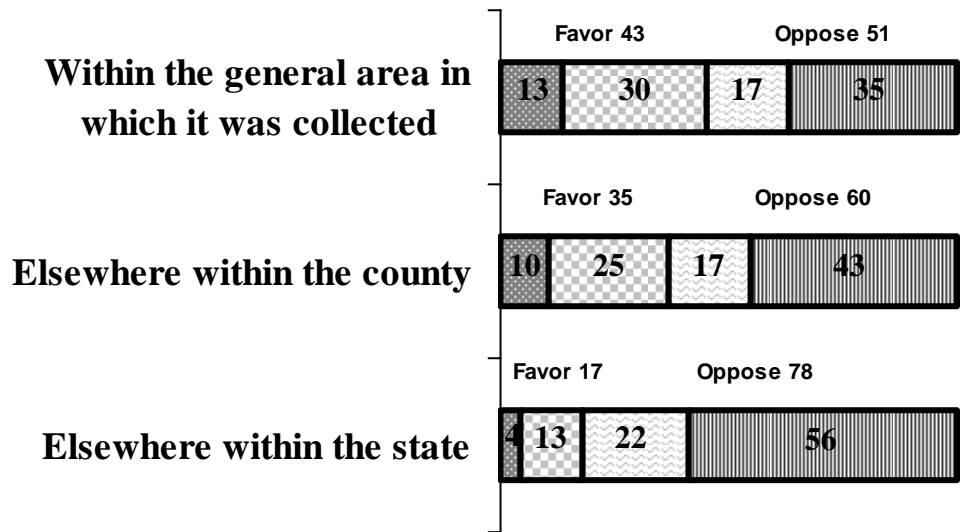
*Man: "The unfair part is if you toll an existing road. It gives the public the sense you're double dipping again. (Moderator: How would you explain it?) Politicians are good at explaining it. The bottom line is they want more money and this is an easy way to get it."*

The results from the survey are instructive regarding how difficult it may be to dislodge people from their geocentric chauvinism. Near the end of the interviews, respondents were asked under what geographic constraints they would allow tolls collected in their area to be spent somewhere else, the condition being that they had to be spent on transportation-related projects. Here's how it was worded:

*"Let's say there was a toll on a road or bridge in your area, and there was a proposal to use some of the toll money for other transportation projects or services besides the road or bridge on which the toll is collected. Would you ... strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose or strongly oppose using some of the toll money for other transportation projects or services ..."*

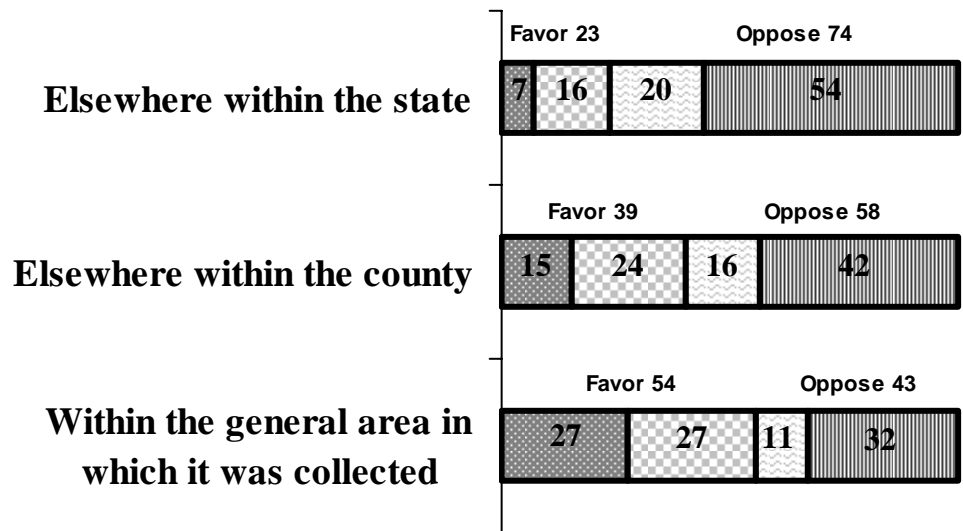
The choices were then read to them in split samples – half of them heard the sequence moving from near to far, and the other half from far to near.

### SS1: Near to Far



Strongly Favor 
  Somewhat Favor 
  Somewhat Oppose 
  Strongly Oppose

### SS2: Far to Near



Strongly Favor 
  Somewhat Favor 
  Somewhat Oppose 
  Strongly Oppose

The results are fairly dismal in terms of the overall good to society. People are very geocentric and protective of turf. The one thing that is instructive for building messages is that if we start with the idea of spending such accumulated toll revenues in far corners of the state, then people are more supportive of such spending when the proposed locale is closer to home. But if the message begins with a proposal for spending someplace nearby, but not immediately connected to the place where the tolls were collected, then a distinctly parochial and miserly mood takes over. The broader proposal – spending funds in a far-away place within the state – does not work. Framing and pre-conditioning are distinct influences on a person’s eventual acquiescence in such a plan. In terms of the results of the survey, only 43% would be willing to allow such spending “within the general area in which it was collected” if that is the first proposal a person hears. But if the person first hears a proposal for spending such locally collected tolls elsewhere in the state, and then the state backs off and proposes spending the funds “within the general area,” then favorability goes up to 54%.

*“I’m not excited about paying for something in another county.” (Man, Vancouver)*

**26. When tolling and pricing concepts are compared side by side, tolling for revenue outpoints pricing for traffic flow as a rationale for tolling.**

Here are the two written concepts focus group participants were asked to read and evaluate.

Tolling for Revenue	Pricing for Traffic Management
<p>Tolling has been used since ancient times to raise funds to fund expensive roads and bridges. Since 1930, 14 toll bridges have been built in Washington State using bonds supported by toll revenue. The last toll in Washington came off the Hood Canal Bridge in 1984.</p> <p>Today, we still have the need for major infrastructure that goes above and beyond what can be funded through the usual taxes. It makes sense for the users to pay extra for expensive projects.</p>	<p>Traffic congestion continues to grow at a faster pace than our ability to pay for and build improvements. Even if we wanted to, we are finding that we cannot build our way out of congestion. Most businesses, including public utilities, use price to manage the use of expensive facilities. Electric companies charge more during the day to encourage homeowners to wash their dishes at night when there is more electricity capacity. Airlines and hotels charge more for seats and rooms during busy times. Movies offer discounts for matinees. Our gas tax is paid by the gallon, which means that every mile costs just about the same, no matter where or when it is driven.</p> <p>With technology, we can manage the flow on highways by charging higher prices at congested times, and lower prices (or no price) during non-congested times. If we can get even a few people to take some trips during non-congested times, the whole system will flow better, benefiting everyone. As we look to a future with more and more traffic, pricing highways can provide us congestion-free alternatives that were impossible before the advent of modern toll collection technology.</p>

The power of precedent was apparent in the vote. Of 53 participants who voted on this, the tolling rationale out-pointed the pricing rationale 34-19. It was comforting for participants to know, or be reminded, that tolling for revenue is not a new concept in the state. History is a track record and showed them that it worked. Pricing for traffic management, however, was a harder sell, even with very good analogies to airlines, hotels and movie theaters that manage finite capacity through variable pricing.

The advantages to tolling for revenues that participants brought up included:

- Specificity of spending;
- Speed of payoff;
- Ability to underwrite big-ticket construction; and
- What you pay for is what you get.

The disadvantages to tolling for revenues included:

- Fear that tolls would not be lifted or the tolls reduced once the capital construction costs have been met;
- Double paying if the toll is applied to an existing road or bridge;
- Fear tolling will slow traffic; and
- Fear that tolls might be used for more than existing project needs.

The advantages to pricing for traffic management included:

- Facilitates better traffic flow;
- People can plan to take advantage of variable pricing;
- Safety because of better spacing and flow;
- Use is tied directly to cost; and
- Choice of whether to use or not in cases of HOT lanes.

And the disadvantages seen in pricing for traffic management:

- Many don't have option of when they must use highways and therefore must pay peak prices;
- Temporary fix – more capacity needs to be built;
- Fear of manipulation and government intrusions; and
- Fear it will become compulsory.

The interesting thing about the exercise is that even though the traditional outvoted the new, people came up with ideas. Prime among them from several groups was the suggestion that a tax benefit could be given to employers who institute flex time for their employees, thus freeing them to take advantage of better variable-pricing travel times. Others speculated about various incentives, such as discounts to commercial users or seniors or low-income drivers as well as the discounts based on congestion or times. It was also suggested that trucking firms be given special incentives to travel more during the night or mid-day.

The most persuasive points about tolling for revenues were history and track records. They know it works to pay for bridges. The most persuasive points about pricing for traffic management were the comparisons to airlines, hotels and movies. Most liked the analogies, but a few noted again that whereas people have a choice of when they want to see a movie, not everybody has a choice of when he or she must show up for work.

*“Is this an effective traffic management tool in other states?” (Man, Bellevue)*

*“They would have to show me that the toll would help me, how it will benefit me. I’m selfish.” (Woman, Bellevue)*

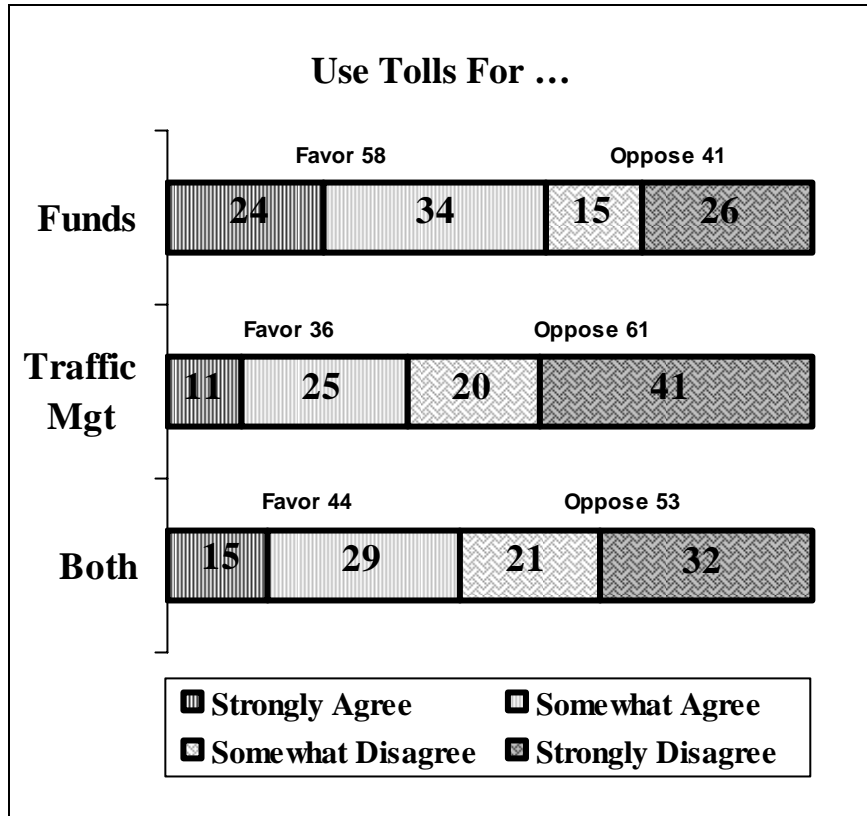
**27. A similar pattern obtained when the survey sample was asked about tolling and pricing.**

The respondents were read three statements and asked to agree or disagree with each one on a four-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree:

“We should use tolls as a way to provide *funds* to improve our highway system.”

“We should use tolls as a way to shift *traffic* patterns and spread out road usage by charging higher tolls to discourage use when there is a lot of traffic and lower tolls when there is less traffic.”

“We should use tolls both to raise funds and to shift traffic patterns and spread out road usage.”



Note the intensity in the answers. Tolling has approximately equal numbers of intense supporters (24%) and intense opponents (26%), while intensity of feelings toward pricing is about a 4:1 ratio in opposition. The answers to the third statement, a combination of the two, reveal that pricing for traffic management is a heavier drag on acceptance of tolling overall.

Of those who disagreed with the pricing philosophy, we tested to see if it might be due to the perception that drivers had to stop at toll booths. The answer, in short, was that the fear of having to stop was only a minor consideration: 24% of the disagreeing public (or only 15% of the total population) switched to the agree side once they were informed that pricing would not require them to stop at toll booths. Almost 7 out of 10 still disagreed with pricing for traffic management, so obviously there are other considerations at play and our

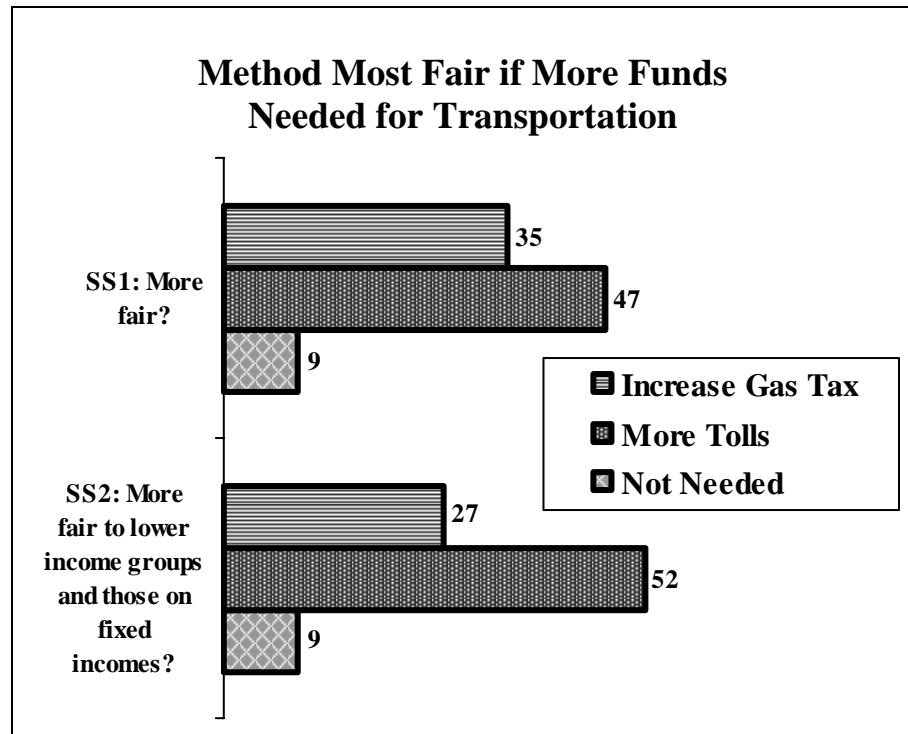


supposition would be the same factors that were brought up in the previous section – fear of government manipulation and/or intrusion, and sympathy for those who do not have flexible work hours.

**28. Concern about low-income and fixed-income groups gains tolls five percentage points in preference over an increase in the gas tax.**

Once the idea of tolling was on the table and a straightforward comparison with the gas tax could be made, we tested perceptions of fairness – that is, which method of raising funds would be considered more fair to lower-income and fixed-income groups, raising the gas tax or putting tolls on more highways.

Using a split-sample technique, half of the sample heard this question: “All in all, if more funds had to be raised for transportation within the state, which method do you feel would be more fair ... increase the gasoline tax or put tolls on more highways and roads?” The two offered choices were rotated.



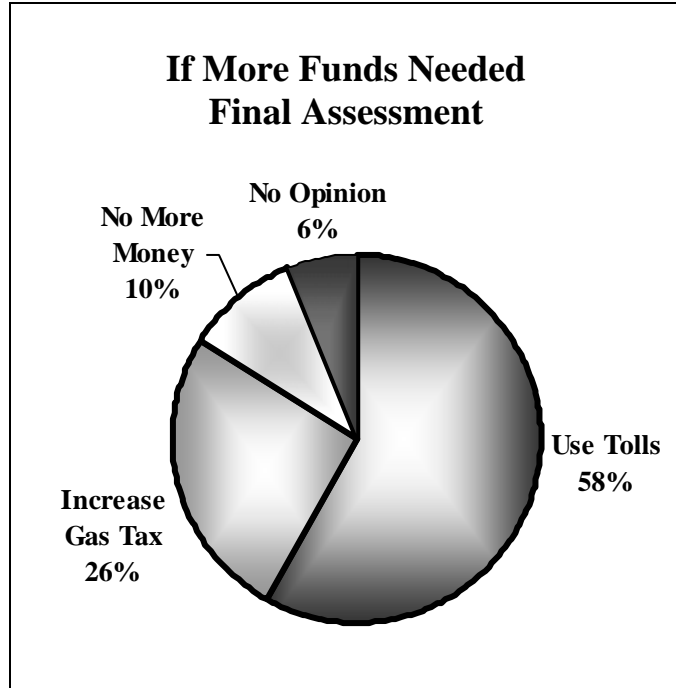
The other half of the sample heard the same wording but with the added phrase “... be more fair to lower income groups and those on fixed incomes ...”

As can be seen on the accompanying chart, referencing lower SES (socio-economic status) groups pushes sentiments five percentage points in the direction of using tolls more. In other words, tolls are seen as less onerous for lower-income groups than an increase in the gas tax.

**29. By the end of the interviews, support for toll roads as a preferred way to provide additional funds had substantially improved.**

After all other substantive questions had been asked in the interview and the only remaining items were demographic questions, the respondents were asked for their summary position about additional funds:

“All things considered, if additional funds were needed to fund future transportation improvements, which of these would you prefer – increase the gasoline tax to pay for the improvements ... or ... Use tolls from the drivers who use the improvements?” These choices were rotated and we also captured those who volunteered that they rejected both choices and preferred that no additional funds be raised.



What this says is that the more people are exposed to the issue, and the more they are given various points of view to think about, the greater the attraction to tolling as a source of revenue over an increase in the gasoline tax.

**30. Focus group results are early warning indicators.**

One thing to keep in mind about focus groups is that a little bit of cynicism or a distorted understanding expressed by one person can cause others to exaggerate their concerns. And we find in follow-on, statistically projectable surveys, as we have on a couple of points in the present study, that a majority of people may not share their fears. Nonetheless, there is a pattern that should be noted: surveys measure attitudes as they exist within a 15-minute focus on a topic; focus groups can reveal what *may* (and I emphasize it only as a possibility) happen if and when people pay more attention to an issue, as we simulate during a two-hour discussion..

At the very least, focus group results, when they may differ from the survey results, can be an early warning mechanism. In the present case, the cynicism about government use of the toll revenues did not achieve majority status. But consider it an attitude just underneath the surface (and held by a vociferous minority in some

cases) that at any rate we must take pains to address. In the present examples of fairness or workability of traffic management, people are looking for reassurances, for track records and histories of the ideas under discussion, for they want to believe the best will out, a measure of cynicism notwithstanding.

**31. People are more open to tolling if they have an alternative non-toll option.**

A few participants voiced concern about the fairness of tolling if a low-income or fixed-income person does not have a viable non-tolling option. Whether this was a legitimate concern for others (I have my doubts) or a convenient hide-behind excuse to oppose certain types of tolls was not clear. Either way, we can expect the fairness issue to be an important element of any debates.

*“Some can’t afford it. What about the people who don’t have alternative modes of travel?” (Man, Vancouver)*

*“I like the idea of individual lanes instead of the entire road being tolled. If it’s a lane, it’s a premium lane and goes faster. You have the option. I don’t like being forced to pay a toll. If I have the option and I’m in a hurry, then I’ll do it. Otherwise I’ll sit in traffic.” (Man, Bellevue)*

Stakeholders were generally not that enamored with the tolling of an entire road, but did like the idea of HOT lanes where drivers had a choice.

Regarding parallel or alternate facilities, a dilemma exists between the belief that an alternative is needed for those who don’t want to use a toll facility, but also the need to toll parallel facilities (as in the 520 and I-90 bridges) to avoid “toll avoidance” impacts on the toll-free alternative. Important to this discussion was the need to offer choices to travelers.

**32. People will pay if they feel they are gaining more control over their lives.**

Control over one’s life is an often-expressed value in behavioral research that is stronger than may initially appear on the values radar. People will spend time or money if they can see a clear ability to gain more control over their lives. But they will resist if they feel they are being forced to do something which provides few benefits and/or if they feel they do not have an alternative.

I asked a Yakima group what conditions they would place on any new tolling facility and their immediate answer was that the revenues had to be spent on the facility under consideration and not transferred to some other project. This is, in essence,

an indicator of control. They feel they have control because they, as users of the facility, can then believe that their dollars are providing an immediate benefit to them.

**33. HOV lanes are not viewed as generators of new carpools.**

Almost all of the participants in the focus groups agreed that people use the HOV lanes mainly when they are already traveling together, such as a social evening, rather than forming a carpool with the express purpose of taking advantage of the HOV lanes. As one woman in Bellevue put it, “The only time I used it was when I had a baby. I never considered pairing up with anybody.” In the other Bellevue group, two women brought up the same theme:

*“I have mixed emotions about carpool lanes. The true purpose of carpool lanes is to get cars off the road. Driving a 10-year-old kid doesn’t get a car off the road.”*

*“Carpool lanes don’t encourage carpools. Few form a carpool to use the lane. They’re either formed already or not.”*

The same sentiment was also expressed in the second Yakima group.

**34. People did not think highly of six of eight funding ideas.**

Each group was read eight ideas for paying for transportation facilities and asked to rate each on a 0-10 scale. Two of them scored above 5, considered the mid-point between acceptance and rejection while six fell below:

Funding Idea	Average Score (0-10 Scale)
Build a new road or bridge and put a toll on it to help pay for construction and operations	7.8
Offer more incentives for high-occupancy vehicles (HOV), such as allowing them to use toll facilities for free	6.4
Toll an existing road or bridge to help pay for its improvement, maintenance and upkeep	4.6
Use tolls that vary by time of day or congestion levels to manage traffic flow, so we don't have to build as many highway lanes	4.4
Increase the gasoline tax	3.3
Charge drivers a fee to enter congested urban areas – known as cordon tolling – such as is done in London	2.6
Eliminate the gas tax and replace it with an annual fee based on how many miles you drive	2.4
Eliminate the gas tax and put tolls on the whole roadway system with different prices based on where and when you travel	2.3

**35. There is a substantial difference between tolling a new facility and an existing general purpose facility.**

This has been known for a long time, but it was clearly expressed in the discussions. Tolling an existing general purpose facility brings cries of double payment while placing a toll on a new facility can be seen as a reasonable move. Because of their present perceptions of tolling, let alone the fact that the idea of tolls for traffic management is still a distant concept to them, they do not grasp how converting an existing lane into a HOT lane will speed traffic. To them, it's the same volume and the same capacity with tolls as the only new feature. It doesn't compute for them.

When a new facility comes on line, however, it's a different story. If they're ever likely to believe that there may not be enough money generated from the gasoline tax to cover a project, it will be when that project is being built – when it is visible and they see actual work underway.

### **36. There is general apprehension about a statewide tolling system.**

The participants in the focus groups did not take to the idea of a comprehensive tolling system and built their answers to this idea around five responses:

- Complexity
- Too drastic of a change
- Comfortable with the gas tax
- Fear of abuse and fraud
- Fear of writing a blank check

The blank-check fear was based on lack of detail. They asked where the dividing line would be between tolled and non-tolled roads. Some feared that government over time would turn more roads into toll roads than needed because it would be seen as an easy way to increase funds.

In answer to a question of whether a comprehensive tolling system would benefit or hurt people in the less populated areas of the state, the Yakima participants were split. They could see how they might be hurt if tourists would not pay to visit their part of the state. On the other hand they could see a benefit to a total system if it got rid of the gas tax, but as one man said, "I would be inclined to support one or the other, but don't give me both." And another one opined, "The gas tax system is not a broken system. We have problem areas, but the system should be tweaked, not reinvented."

*"In lieu of state funding, they'd turn it over to bidders. A company would put it in and then they would charge. I don't want to be part of that." (Man, Yakima)*

If Regional Transportation Investment Districts (RTIDs) receive tolling authority, some stakeholders foresee the possibility of the RTIDs becoming the preferred source of funding for local projects wherever they are created. The fear is that if they were to be created in the more populous counties of the state (which are the only places they are seen as feasible), then we could see the development of a series of fiefdoms that help themselves, with no one willing to pay for statewide improvements. This could leave the less populated rural areas without transportation funding.

### **37. Cordon tolling generates heat on both sides.**

All in all, this idea is probably ahead of its time if the focus groups are indicative of statewide voter sentiments. While, for example, the last Vancouver group was split 50-50 philosophically, the intensity of opinion was definitely on the anti side. An urban area would have to have the enticements and popularity of London to withstand cordon tolling. As one woman said, she'd simply find other places to shop.

The European model where the most desirable homes are closer to the center of the city is not duplicated in America, where the reverse obtains. Hence, cordon tolling may not be that transferable.

*"If I had to pay a fee to get into my own area, no way." (Woman, Bellevue)*

*"It's a terrible idea, a recipe for recession in that congested area. I'd find another area to shop." (Woman, Vancouver)*

*"Is it realistic and can it be done? I think it was an excellent idea." (Man, Vancouver)*

### **38. The annual mileage fee idea is a loser.**

This one definitely does not make the grade at the present time although one never knows how attitudes may change in the future. The more people thought about it, the more questions they had. They talked about complexity and that a mile is not a mile because of the different vehicles people drive. They saw too many opportunities for abuse and too much government intervention. They also felt it was unfair to those who drive lighter weight cars, that is, the vehicles that don't cause as much wear and tear on roads as heavier cars driving the same number of miles. No one in the six groups rose to its defense.

*"It punishes people who have tried to be ecologically conscious." (Woman, Bellevue)*

*"How would they be able to organize the annual mileage fee?" (Woman, Vancouver)*

*"It's almost unworkable." (Man, Vancouver)*

### **39. One group's glimpse into the future suggests that several of the tested ideas will become fact.**

In conjunction with the presentation of the eight ideas, I asked the first Yakima group how they saw the future of these ideas – what the situation would be 10 or 15 years from now. They unanimously felt that the gas tax will have been increased at a rate exceeding the rate of inflation, that Seattle area roads would be mostly tolled, incentives for use of HOT lanes would be common, and that cordon tolling was a 50-50 possibility. They did not believe they would see an annual mileage fee or pricing the dominant reason for tolling; tolling would still be instituted mainly for revenue.

#### **40. Cynicism about government spending blocks acceptance of creative funding approaches.**

First there is the well-known cynical belief that government never rescinds a tax. So, many focus group participants said that tolls, once established, will never go away even after their initial objective has been reached.

Second is the suspicion of the unknown. Because people fear change, new ideas will always arouse suspicion of hidden costs and hidden ways of funding them. This is why publicizing the track record of tolling methods in other locales is so important in gaining the trust of the people. While everyone likes to view their state, county, city, neighborhood as innovative and forward looking, they simultaneously do not want to be the guinea-pig pioneers. Much better to show how creative tolling has worked in other states before expecting a state where there are presently no toll roads to embrace the tolling idea in general.

Third is the suspicion that government has an ulterior motive – to so complicate the funding process with taxes, tolls and fees that people will give up and accept a broad taxing system, such as imposing a state income tax, because of the annoyance of it all.

Whether these are true in fact is not the point. In cases of public persuasion, perceptions are the reality we must deal with.

*“They’ll never give up the tolls. They’ll never give up money once they have it.” (Woman, Vancouver)*

*“They haven’t shown us they’re using the money well that we’re already giving them.” (Woman, Bellevue)*

*“Government takes a whole lot of our money and I’m not pleased that it keeps going up ... now we learn they have a horrendous surplus. Would just as soon have my money back. They get a lot of money from everywhere.” (Woman, Vancouver)*

*“What they want to do is hit us with a state income tax. At some time we’ll give in and say it’s better than all this other kind of stuff.” (Woman, Bellevue)*

Even with all that said there was a deeper understanding among some participants in the group that tolls had to be calculated to buy more than the physical plant, that money had to be set aside for ongoing maintenance.

*“You can’t pay all that money [for a tolling facility] and then don’t pay for maintenance.” (Man, Yakima)*



#### 41. Miscellaneous points:

- If left up to them and given only two choices, people in the focus groups would collect 80% of transportation funds from the gas tax and 20% from tolls.
- Vancouver participants claimed that traffic on I-5 moved faster when they got rid of the HOV lanes.
- There was strong agreement in Yakima that WSDOT should put in a tunnel over Snoqualmie Pass for passenger vehicles only and turn the present route into a trucks-only highway.
- Many participants who spoke to the financial situation seemed to have a distorted view of bonds, as if bonds were a magic solution to funding projects. At least on the surface, few indicated that they knew that bonds by themselves are not a source of money, only a means of advancing funds that have to have a source.
- Yakima participants thought trucks should be charged double whatever passenger cars are charged.
- No one in the last Yakima group remembered unaided anything on the ballot last year about the gas tax; there was no mention of Initiative 912. When I said the number of the initiative, it was only vaguely familiar to a few. As one man said, "After the election is over, I forget about it." For all their complaining about taxes, people do not have much memory of related issues even only a few months later.
- The role of public transportation came up periodically in the groups. The problem, they said, was the time it takes to get somewhere, what with transfers and waits.
- The first Yakima group was asked which government agencies they trusted and distrusted. They trusted the attorney general and emergency services. Their distrust was mainly social service agencies.

#### **42. Final advice to the Washington State Transportation Commission.**

At the end of the four Yakima and Vancouver groups, the participants were asked to write down the advice, suggestions, ideas and recommendations they would give to the Washington State Transportation Commission. There were six main themes:

- Consider alternative transportation ideas; mass transit
- Use transportation dollars for transportation projects only
- More public communication and involvement
- Consider affordability factors
- Improve existing roadways
- Use tolls to help specific areas

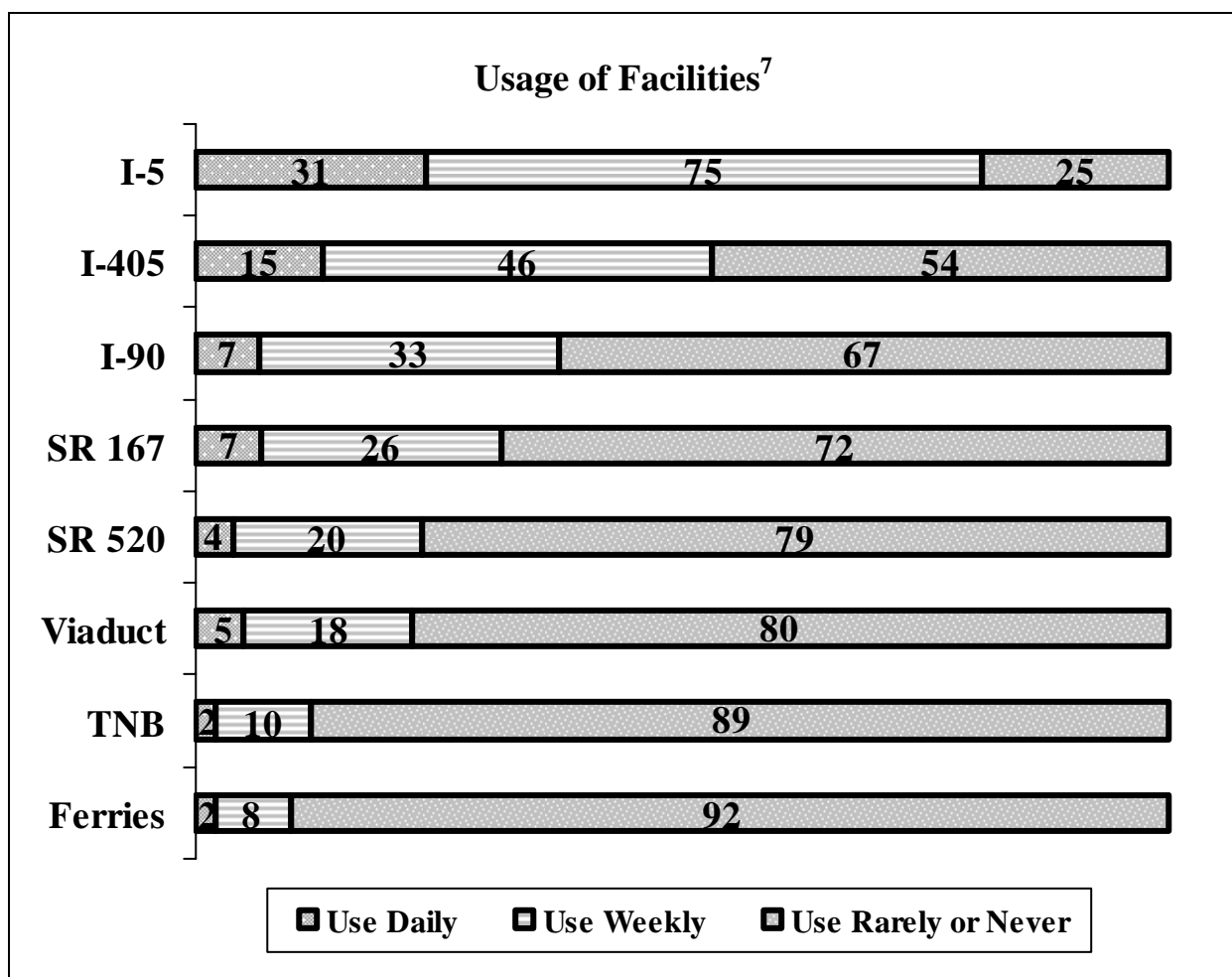
Communicating the need for transportation improvements as part of the economic health of the state is essential. Stakeholders understand the importance of goods movement to the state's economy and to the future transportation system, and they believe that raising awareness about the importance of the economy and goods movement to all citizens is an important rationale for explaining why we need tolling. We have to explain that if we don't pay to improve the transportation system, the whole state will simply lose business to competing states and countries.

## Specific Area Analysis: Puget Sound

Respondents in the four-county Puget Sound market were administered an additional 24 survey questions.

### 43. Usage of facilities follows predictable patterns.

I-5 and I-405 are used respectively by 31% and 15% of the respondents almost daily. Average weekly use of key freeways, highways and bridges is as follows:



<sup>7</sup> During an average week, how many days do you use the following freeways, highways or bridges ... 5 to 7 times a week, 3 to 4 times a week, once or twice a week, rarely or never?

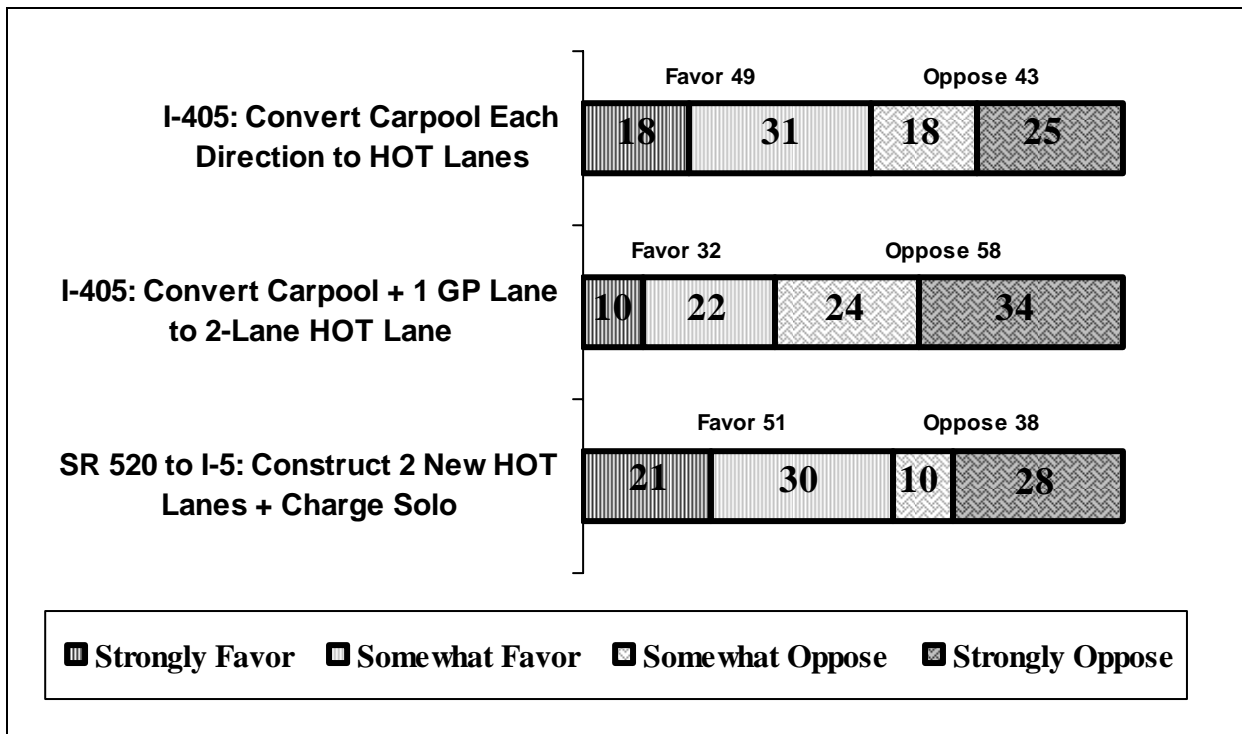
**44. Snoqualmie Pass is used by most Puget Sound residents at least once a year.**

One out of seven traveled over the Snoqualmie Pass within the last 30 days, 56% within the last six months, and 79% within the last year. Of those who traveled over the pass within the last year, 25% of them encountered a time when they wanted to travel over the pass but decided not to because of road conditions in the pass or because it was closed.

Such results suggest there should be substantial support for tolling on the pass and using the funds for improvements as discussed elsewhere in this report.

**45. Puget Sound residents would support converting existing I-405 carpool lanes but resist converting existing general purpose lanes into HOT lanes.**

These questions about HOT lanes came after all of the general questions in which such concepts as HOT lanes had already been described. Here is how the Puget Sound sample responded to three favor-oppose statements:



Two of the three proposals garner a plurality of support over opposition mainly on the strength that the proposals would make more capacity available, either in newly constructed lanes or HOV lanes to people who do not currently use HOV lanes. The question might be why only a bare majority of 51% would favor two new HOT lanes, and the answer might lie in the focus group discussions where people did not readily catch that HOT lanes are HOV for carpoolers but solo drivers can pay to use them. This should be made clear in any messages to the public. Otherwise they may think that only solo drivers can use them, as odd as that misunderstanding might sound.

As for converting an existing GP lane into a HOT lane, the 58-32 opposition to it bears out what virtually every focus group told us – what’s mine is mine and any changes should be in the direction of providing new lanes.

**46. Reactions to changes on Interstate 5 were very similar to attitudes about Interstate 405.**

Two of the same statements were asked about I-5:

Proposal	Strongly Favor	Somewhat Favor	Somewhat Oppose	Strongly Oppose
On I-5 in King County, convert the existing carpool lane in each direction into a H-O-T, or high occupancy vehicle lane.	16	32	14	32
	<b>Favor 48</b>		<b>Oppose 46</b>	
On I-5 in King County, convert both the existing carpool lane and one existing general purpose lane into a two-lane H-O-T lane.	11	22	22	39
	<b>Favor 33</b>		<b>Oppose 61</b>	

Opposition to these two ideas was stronger about I-5 than I-405. In a world where the proposals have a fighting chance, one would expect to see the strongly favor and the strongly oppose numbers about the same. In the cases of these identical propositions for each of two major freeways, the intensity is on the side

of the opposition, especially when it comes to converting a GP lane. It will take time and ongoing public open houses and explanations to win over a majority of the population.

**47. Cordon tolling and replacing the gas tax with a blanket tolling system are too big of a change for Puget Sound to support at present.**

Only 20% of Puget Sound residents took a liking to the idea of identifying the most congested part of downtown Seattle and charging vehicles a fee to enter that area. The intensity against this idea was 11:1.

Similar numbers obtained when people were presented with two ideas in split-sample format:

“Eliminate the gasoline tax completely and in its place make every major highway in the state a tollroad, assuming no stops to pay tolls will be required. Assume the same amount of money is collected either way.”

“Make every major highway in the state a tollroad, assuming no stops to pay tolls will be required, and use the funds to eliminate the gasoline tax. Assume the same amount of money is collected either way.”

Both versions of what is actually the same concept achieved the same one-out-of-five support. There was greater intensity against the idea if the elimination of the gas tax is the first thing out of the chute. Much as people may complain about the tax rate, they’re comfortable with it. Their resistance to the idea is not as much the fear they would have to stop to pay the toll (as we discussed earlier) as much as it is too big of a change and too much to institute in one fell swoop. Again it will take time for comprehensive tolling to catch on. And cordon tolling will take at least an equivalent time to become accepted by a majority.

**48. A combination of gas tax and specific tolled projects is one of the three most acceptable forms of tolling at the present time.**

The statement presented was phrased:

“Keep the gasoline tax the way it is and use tolls to help pay for specific big-ticket transportation projects.”

Support for this concept reached 65% and the intensity was also on its side by a 3:2 margin. This is the general fall-back philosophy when it comes to tolling, but it does not mean that all big-ticket projects will enjoy the same level of support. As always, details and locations matter.

**49. The two other most popular tolling projects involve the 520 bridge.**

Two proposals were presented:

“Put a toll on the 520 floating bridge to help pay for its replacement and improvement.”

“Put a toll on both the 520 floating bridge and the I-90 bridge for a variety of transportation improvements across Lake Washington, including transit.”

Here tolling enjoys its highest support, 74% and 60% respectively. And in each case the intensity is on the proponent side. The key word in each proposal is *improvements*.” While opposition will surface, as it always does, messages about improvements should carry the day.

**50. Converting the existing carpool lane on SR 167 is a toss-up.**

The stretch of road under consideration is between I-405 in Renton to 15<sup>th</sup> Street in Auburn and the favor-oppose percentages are 39-40. But intensity is on the side of the opposition by better than a 2:1 margin.

**51. Although there is evidence people want something done over Snoqualmie Pass, specifics may trigger defections.**

Even though a fourth of the Puget Sound sample has been frustrated in attempts to cross over the pass in recent months, support for tolls to pay for a climbing lane for trucks and for better maintenance falls short of a majority by a 42-52 margin. As we’ll see in the next section, even the I-90 corridor in the eastern part of the state gives it only four more percentage points in support, 46-50. But all in all, support (even without intensity) is close enough to the majority status that this public outreach and education program can be successful.

As for what Puget Sound voters say would be a fair amount to pay if a toll over the pass were established, the median amount is a little over one dollar. Note that people will always volunteer the low end of the range of acceptability. Further, we don't need all of Puget Sound traveling over the pass to make a toll there viable. There were 14% of the sample who said they would consider tolls in excess of \$2 to be fair.



## Specific Area Analysis: I-90 Corridor

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The nine-county I-90 corridor residents were asked four additional questions, but first a few more observations from the focus groups.

### **52. Tolling Snoqualmie Pass should trigger less opposition than putting tolls on other locations.**

There are two reasons for this: (1) in comparison to other possible tolling locations, Snoqualmie Pass presents more visible things the state could do (and in the eyes of many, should do) to improve the road and the safety of drivers; and (2) there is an widespread recognition of the importance of this east-west artery to the economic well-being of the entire state.

Both the visible the need for improvements and the connection to the economy produce a high likelihood that the public will support tolls over the pass that fund improvements. The things people said they wanted done read like they had a copy of WSDOT's wish list: build a tunnel under the most dangerous segments of the pass, improve the road bed, widen the corridor to provide wider lanes and better shoulders, construct a new lane for slow trucks, more webbing for rockslides, and so forth. Whatever the state decides to do to the pass should meet with general approval from the traveling public, if the participants in the Yakima groups are indicative.

Tolls came up unaided quite early in both Yakima groups. It seems that they had already figured out that improvements over the pass would not happen fast enough if they had to wait for the normal funding processes to play out.

When asked what they would consider a fair toll one way over the pass (with the assumption that tolls will only be collected in one direction), the amounts ranged from one dollar to five dollars. The two Yakima groups seemed less price-sensitive on this matter than the groups in Bellevue and Vancouver were about tolling facilities in their areas.

*“\$1.50 to \$2.50 is not a big deal.” (Man, Bellevue)*

**53. Travel over Snoqualmie Pass does not differ markedly from patterns on the western side, but more from the eastern side have been frustrated because of pass closures.**

One in five has traveled over the pass within the last month, 58% within the last six months and 76% within the last year. The frequency of travel is higher in the I-90 corridor counties than from Puget Sound, but the total percent of travelers within a year's period is higher by a touch on the western side of the Cascades.

While a fourth of Puget Sound residents have been frustrated in their desires to travel over the pass within the last 12 months, that figure for the east side is one third.

As stated in the previous section, support for a toll over the pass for a truck lane and better maintenance reaches 46%, but 50% say they would oppose it and the intensity is stronger for the opponents. Nonetheless, this is a winnable situation if framed to the frustration travelers have felt.

The median toll considered to be fair for a trip over the pass is about the same as given by the voters in Puget Sound – just over a dollar a trip in each direction. In the same way, an equal percentage of voters in the I-90 counties are willing to view tolls in excess of \$2 as fair, just the same as the Sound.

## Specific Area Analysis: Vancouver

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The Vancouver market was defined as two counties and voters in this area received an additional nine questions.

### **54. Tolls on Columbia River bridges will only be accepted if they are part of a larger traffic circulation plan.**

Those who have taken the Tacoma Narrows Bridge (mainly discussed in the Bellevue and Vancouver groups) and those who use the Columbia River bridges lodged similar complaints: it's what happens after one crosses the bridge that is the problem.

For users of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, the chokepoint is getting onto the I-5: As one Vancouver participant who has used the bridge put it, "The problem is I-5 at the Tacoma Dome; it's not the bridge." For those crossing from Vancouver to Portland, the problem is Delta Park. Snippets from three men in the first Vancouver group reveal the perception of even an international problem at that point:

*"The bridge here connects to Delta Park and then you're nowhere."*

*"To put a better road thru Delta Park, you'd have to buy hundreds of acres."*

*"There should be moneys available from NAFTA because I-5 becomes a bottleneck in the Delta Park area. Commerce from Canada and Mexico stops at Delta Park."*

Obviously, as WSDOT has known for some time, it's a system problem rather than a component problem.

The "captive audience" dilemma is a desirable condition for tolling, but also lends itself to the outcry of unfairness for the same reason that makes it desirable. In the view of some stakeholders, Vancouver faces the same potential dilemma as Kitsap Peninsula if bridge improvements toll both the I-5 and I-205 bridges. This would affect the 60,000+ people who commute daily across the river to jobs in Portland.

**55. The idea of a new toll bridge across the Columbia triggered several interesting observations.**

The annoyance of slowing traffic across the bridges is more of a hindrance to the acceptance of tolling than the cost of the toll itself. The idea of bridge tolls did not bother the Vancouver participants from a cost standpoint as much as it did from a time standpoint. The first Vancouver group was unanimous in its concern that tolls for bridge crossings would slow traffic rather than facilitate it.

Should a new bridge be built, the second Vancouver group was unanimous that it should be funded with tolls rather than by an increase in the gas tax.

Should a new bridge be built, the Vancouver participants thought, on average, that a fair amount to charge would be \$.85. What they would be willing to pay would be \$1.35. As in other groups we've tested, neither the perceived fair price nor what they claim they would be willing to pay comes up to the probable true cost. This is not a worrisome item, however, in that it is human nature to always be on the low side of one's true willingness, just in case a lower stated willingness might have an influence on those setting the prices.

The Vancouver groups were splattered in their opinions of where a new third bridge should be built: 9 would put it closer to or even west of the I-5 bridge, 5 near the I-205 bridge, and 2 east of the 205 bridge. Not much consensus other than their overall favorability toward having a new one.

*"I'm not against a new bridge, but you'll still get to Delta Park and it's bumper to bumper." (Man, Vancouver)*

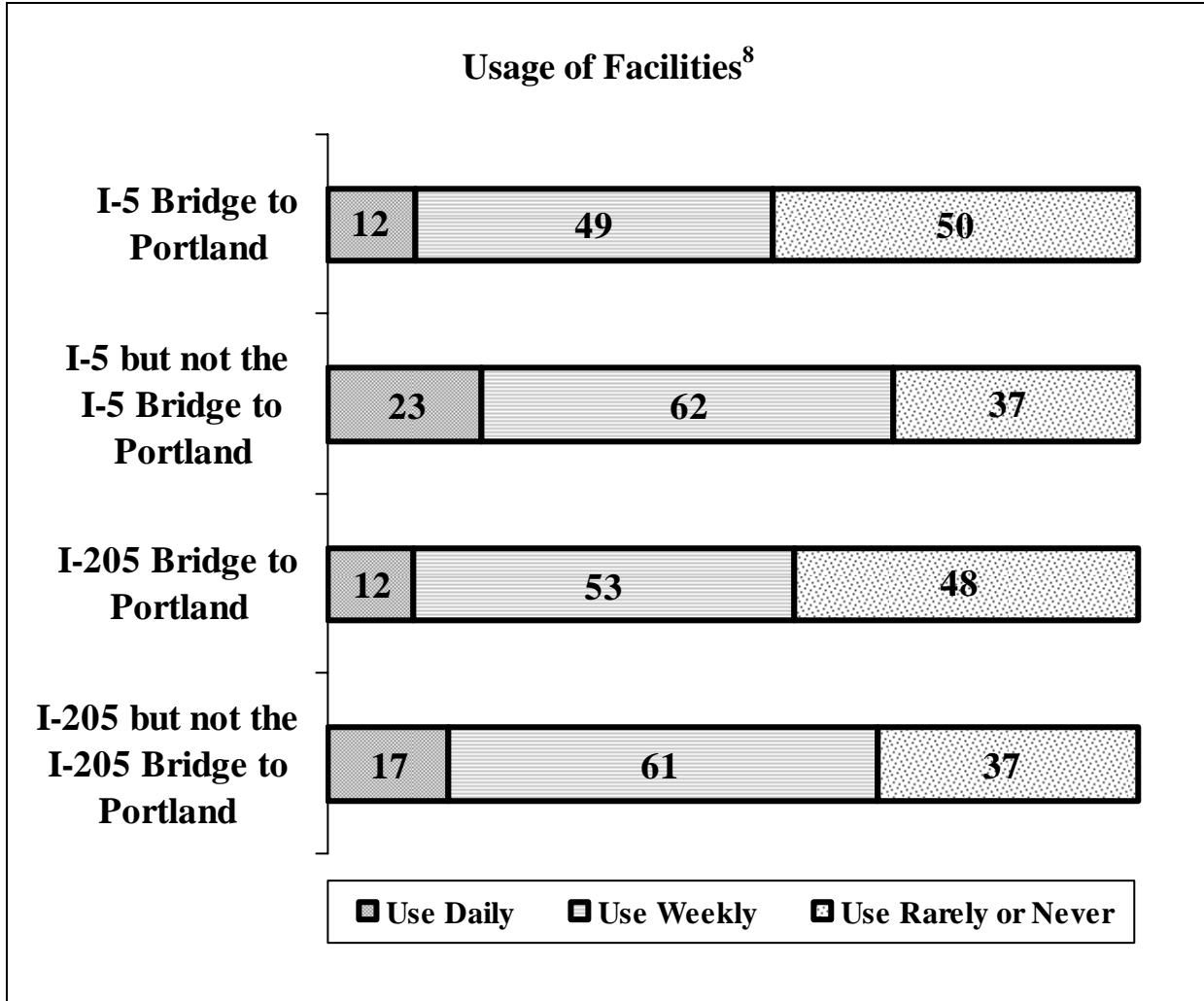
*"I can visualize express lanes on 205 [bridge] going under, but good luck on 5." (Man, Vancouver)*

But the best comment ...

*"You have to put it so you can get somewhere." (Woman, Vancouver)*

**56. A majority of the Vancouver market will use the bridges once or more times a week.**

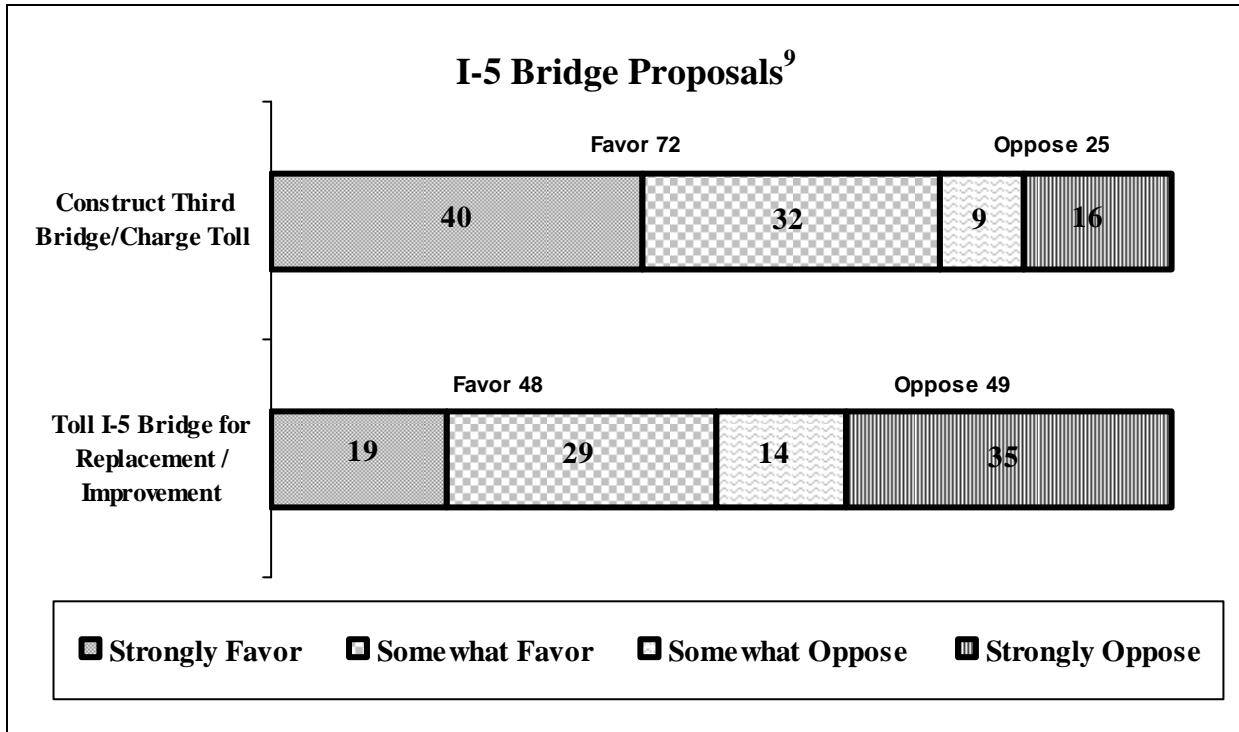
Four questions about use of freeways and bridges were put to the Vancouver market:



<sup>8</sup> During an average week, how many days do you use the following freeways, highways or bridges ... 5 to 7 times a week, 3 to 4 times a week, once or twice a week, rarely or never?

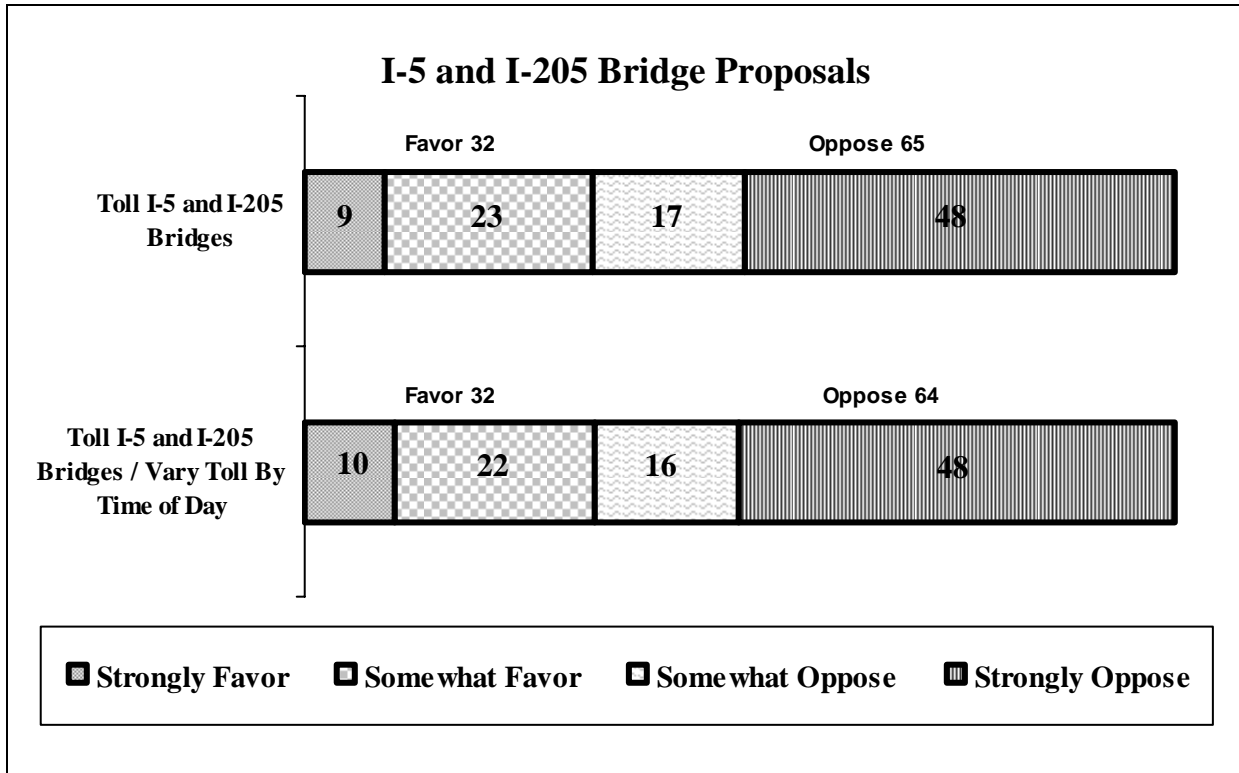
**57. There is strong support for the construction of a new third bridge but ideas for the I-5 bridge are opposed.**

When the idea of building a new third bridge and making it a toll bridge was presented, 72% said they would favor it and 40% said strongly favor. This compares to only 25% opposed. Putting a toll on the existing I-5 bridge, on the other hand, is a dicier prospect. Note this comparison:



<sup>9</sup> For each project I read you, please tell me whether you would ... strongly favor, somewhat favor, somewhat oppose, or strongly oppose ... placing a toll on it if the toll funds had to be used only for that project.

Two other ideas, presented to split samples, fared worst of all:



Note that the reference to traffic management and the enticement of better traffic flow did not decrease the intensity of the opposition. Of all the proposals put before the Vancouver market sample, this one faces the toughest sledding.

If and when tolls for traveling over the Columbia River are established, over half of the sample thought that a toll of less than a dollar in each direction would be a fair charge. Another 15% said it should be free, and 14% said a fair toll would be somewhere between one and two dollars. In comparison to what I-90 travelers would deem a fair toll going over Snoqualmie Pass, voters in Vancouver are substantially below them. Perhaps they view their bridges and the need to cross them as more of a right the state owes them.

As we have seen elsewhere in this report, time and a constant education program will be required to build support for these proposals that the Commission and stakeholders at various levels all know must come sooner or later.

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