

Background Paper #2

Ascertainment Interviews: Opinion of Washington's Community Leaders

■ Executive Summary

This report summarizes the results of an Ascertainment of Stakeholder Views and includes a Situation Analysis for consideration of the issues facing the implementation of tolling in the State of Washington. Frank Wilson & Associates conducted 16 interviews with community leaders and interest group representatives from all areas of the State. Interviews took place between October 13 and November 16.

What Was Most Important to Interviewees?

- **Safety** - Transportation system has been ignored for a couple of decades, making some roads and bridges downright dangerous - especially vulnerable in a seismic event.
- **Economy** - 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 consider these economic factors.
- **Congestion Relief** - Congestion has worsened considerably, with travelers in the Puget Sound area most affected by delays on a regular basis.
- **Fairness is Important** - Tolling the Tacoma Narrows Bridge is acceptable, but there was not a bigger context of tolling to reassure Kitsap Peninsula residents that other areas also would have tolled projects. As a result, most interviewees identified fairness as important in implementing tolling in all areas of the State.
- **Congestion Management is Inherently Fair** - Most interviewees who were 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.

- **Tolling is the Way of the Future** – It is inevitable – and has been the tradition for funding bridge construction in Washington. There is no other way to build what we need.
- **Acceptance of Tolling among the General Public will Take Time** – The State should do some pilot projects first. Many interviewees consider the Tacoma Narrows Bridge and SR 167 as defacto demonstration projects.

What Projects are Conducive to Tolling?

Interviewees indicated that bridges are natural – they have traditionally been tolled and it may be the only way to pay for them. Projects with a clear need and conditions that make tolling practical were mentioned. Interviewees were not in favor of tolling an entire road, but did like the idea of HOT lanes, where drivers had a choice. Projects that add capacity or relieve congestion should be the priority. Some projects that received frequent mentions were:

- SR 520 and I-90 bridges (These were mentioned sometimes separately and sometimes together – with SR 520 mentioned more frequently because of more urgent safety issues. Some interviewees thought a toll would have to be placed on both bridges to avoid congestion on one or the other.).
- SR 167 HOT lanes.
- I-5 through Seattle (problem of Convention Center was mentioned by several interviewees).
- 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 Truck-Only Toll (TOT) project.

Issues

The following issues were raised by interviewees and reflect personal views and opinions. While they do not reflect the views of everyone who was interviewed, they should be considered to see if they carry any weight with the public. They are listed in order of frequency of mention by interviewees.

- **Parallel Facilities** – 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 520 and 90 bridges) to avoid “toll avoidance” impacts on the toll-free alternative. Important to this discussion was the need to offer choices to travelers.

- **Captive Audience** - 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, Vancouver, Washington 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 from Vancouver to jobs in Portland, Oregon.
- **Impact of RTIDs** - If Regional Transportation Investment Districts (RTID) receive tolling authority, some people 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.
- **Communications** - 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 use to initiate a discussion tolling in all its forms. The Tacoma Narrows Bridge and SR 167 projects are viewed as good test cases from which people can learn the practical side of how tolling works.
- **Overall Need for Transportation Improvements** - Communicating the need for transportation improvements in general also is important. Many interviewees understood 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 the State of Washington is an important rationale for explaining why we need tolling. If we don't pay to improve the transportation system, Washington will simply lose business to competing states and countries.

■ Introduction

Frank Wilson & Associates conducted 16 interviews with community leaders throughout the State to identify concerns and preferences about tolling, and to elicit suggestions for criteria that could be used to identify specific projects for possible tolling. These opinions do not represent a statistically valid sample of opinion in Washington State. Rather, these interviews provide a flavor for the kind of issues that WSDOT will face as it explores tolling in the Comprehensive Tolling Study.

The interviews were conducted in October and early November of 2005, coinciding with a statewide election that included Initiative 912 that sought the repeal of a recently enacted gas tax hike. The election heightened awareness of transportation funding issues, and sometimes offered campaign-induced information (or misinformation) as a backdrop for the interviews. This backdrop is important context for some of the responses provided by interviewees.

How Does the Future Look for Tolling in Washington?

The pieces of a hypothetical picture of the future of tolling in Washington include:

- Introducing statewide tolling to the public in Washington by positioning the successful Tacoma Narrows Bridge and SR 167 as examples of possible future projects;
- Successfully implementing a network of toll roads and bridges in Washington that will keep the State competitive and traffic and goods moving; and
- More equitable distribution throughout the State of gas tax resources and toll projects.

These potential elements of a successful implementation of tolling in Washington were among many suggested by interviewees. They are not meant to suggest a particular direction for implementation, nor are they meant to imply that the path taken to this vision was an easy one; rather, they represent one possibility that emerged through responses from interviewees.

As seen through the collective eyes of interviewees, this hypothetical future looks something like this:

Washington State, the first state in the country to establish a statewide tolling policy framework, now features a comprehensive network of toll facilities that share a common electronic toll collection technology. Toll bridges across Tacoma Narrows, Lake Washington and the Columbia River connect seamlessly with HOT lanes, especially on several roads in the Seattle area. With these successes in the State's most populous areas, transportation planners are now working on new toll projects in other areas of the State. To determine the feasibility and desirability of toll projects, they apply the tolling framework developed by the Commission as part of the comprehensive tolling study.

The common electronic toll collection technology lets drivers travel an array of roads and bridges without having to stop and pay tolls. Visitors to the area are able to request a transponder for their rental car so they can take advantage of the congestion-free driving on the HOT lanes and bridges.

■ Methodology

This report is based on interviews with stakeholders from across the State. The views and perceptions of stakeholders are documented and synthesized. Current and future issues that WSTC may face in the development of a statewide tolling framework also are identified, as well as strategic steps for moving forward.

Between October 13 and November 16, 2005, Frank Wilson & Associates conducted 16 interviews to gauge the perceptions of stakeholders on a number of topics related to the Washington State Transportation Commission's ("the Commission") comprehensive tolling study. The Commission's Tolling Committee together with Commission and WSDOT staff provided names of initial interviewees. Second-tier interviewees were those suggested by initial interviewees. Questions probed these areas:

- Level of awareness about the Comprehensive Tolling Study and tolling;
- Perception of the need for transportation improvements in interviewees' areas, as well as statewide;
- Strengths and weaknesses of using tolls to finance road improvements and as a congestion management tool;
- Possible support or opposition to tolling in their community;
- Perceptions about the fairness of tolling and ways to implement tolling so that it is fair to users and non-users; and
- Possible criteria to use in evaluating whether or not tolling should be used in a particular area, and projects that might meet those criteria.

Additionally, every interviewee was asked if there was anyone else that we should talk to whose perspective they thought would be important to the study.

■ Synthesis of Information

Awareness About Tolling in Washington and the Comprehensive Tolling Study

All but one interviewee was following the subject of tolling in the State of Washington, and most had heard about the comprehensive tolling study and thought it was a good idea. Many interviewees mentioned the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, and several noted the SR 167 HOT lane project.

When asked what they thought when they first heard about the study, many interviewees said they thought the time had come for tolling. They mentioned the Tacoma Narrows Bridge and the need to find a balance about who should pay. Several interviewees mentioned that tolling should be done everywhere so there are fewer objections to it in a specific area. One interviewee said they favored lower tolls without a sunset, rather than higher tolls that are removed sooner.

What Are the Transportation Problems Throughout the State?

As might be expected, the Puget Sound area had the highest number of problems identified by interviewees. Whether the discussion centered on freight mobility or commuters, the Puget Sound region always came up for discussion, even among interviewees from other areas of the State.

In addition to naming specific roads or projects, many interviewees commented on the transportation system in general, often citing specific priorities related to their industry or profession:

“When we deal with transportation problems, we tend to look at level of service and accidents. We need to ask, ‘What does it mean to the economy and how will it attract business and promote business growth?’”

“We need ease of access in and out of our marine ports and airport.”

“We live in an earthquake-prone area. We have to shore up and replace bridges.”

“People are paying more for time [spent in congested traffic] than it would cost in higher tax.”

“Safety is the number one concern. Something has to be done for travelers using the highway.”

“The Puget Sound problem is obvious, but there are needs in Vancouver, Blaine and Spokane, too.”

“Two decades of no investment in infrastructure has caused problems everywhere.”

“So many years of nothing, and now we have to catch up.”

The chart below lists the transportation problems identified by interviewees, and some comments made with reference to those problems. Comments in the right column reference the priorities listed in the left column. Priorities reflect the frequency of mention by interviewees.

Interviewee Comment	
Seattle-Tacoma	
<p>In priority order according to interviewees' mentions.</p> <p>SR 520 across Lake Washington</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't just replace the bridge. That just moves the bottleneck. 520 should be widened from 10 miles east of the lake to I-5 on the west. • 520 safety issue has raised it in public awareness. This project (520 bridge) is special and should be handled differently, maybe from the feds. Go outside the regular sources for funds. Maybe a FEMA-type funding to prevent a costly failure instead of waiting for the disaster to replace it.
Alaskan Way Viaduct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like 520 bridge – Alaskan Way Viaduct should be handled differently because of the safety issue and costly replacement. Sea wall is important to this area, too. • The Viaduct is a safety issue.
I-90 between I-5 and Issaquah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I-90 needs HOV lane, use of center lane to increase capacity across Snoqualmie Pass.
I-405 for the entire distance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I-405 is closer to being built than some of the other projects. Widening has been on hold, but there is a record of decision already. Move forward with the ones that are ready.
I-5 through Seattle (from Marysville to Olympia)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I-5 problem goes without saying – you can't get through the city without changing lanes.
SR 167 extension and add HOT lanes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SR 167 HOT lanes are a good idea. They offer a choice. • We need east-west access to get into port facilities – like SR 167 and SR 519.
<p>I-90 Bridge across Lake Washington</p> <p>SR 18 between I-5 and I-90 – complete bypass</p> <p>SR 509 extension between SEATAC and I-5</p> <p>Mentioned only once:</p> <p>Highway 9 in Snohomish County</p> <p>I-605 – talked about but never done</p> <p>SR 519 – important for sea port</p> <p>SR 518 – Build 3rd lane out of SEATAC</p>	
U.S. 395 Improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • North-south freeway is needed. • U.S. 395 has been on the books for years. It goes to Canada and is needed for goods movement (e.g., timber, fruit, hay and mining and cattle), as well as an alternate route around Spokane.
<p>I-90 from Idaho border to 10 miles west of Spokane</p> <p>Grade separation at train crossing</p>	

Interviewee Comment (continued)**Vancouver/Clark County**

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|--------------|--|
| I-5 corridor | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capacity needed through the corridor, including the Columbia River crossing. |
|--------------|--|

Yakima

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| I-90 crossing the Snoqualmie pass | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I-90 improvements across the Snoqualmie Pass are most important, especially for trade/moving goods to port. Also, a national security issue. |
|-----------------------------------|--|

U.S. 12 at 40th Avenue and 16th Avenue

Blaine/Whatcom County

- | | |
|---------------------|--|
| I-5 border crossing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The issue is security versus traffic flow. It's not just a transportation problem. • Capacity is a problem. There are not enough personnel; there is more of a focus on the southern U.S. border. |
|---------------------|--|

Kitsap Peninsula

- | | |
|---|--|
| SR 305 from Poulsbo to Bainbridge Island Ferry Terminal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There should be more terminals in other areas to relieve traffic on the access roads to the ferries. |
| SR 304 from Highway 3 to Bremerton Ferry | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People are resistant to traffic improvements through their communities to terminals. |

What About Using Tolls for Raising Revenue and Congestion Management?¹

Interviewees were asked to identify the strengths and weaknesses of using tolls to raise revenue for transportation projects and as a traffic management tool. Virtually everyone realized the need to find alternative funding mechanisms for transportation projects. Many also mentioned the reality that the toll revenue is not likely to be the only source of funding for the biggest projects. For those who understood the distinction between the two types of tolling, there was support for HOT lanes because of the new alternative they offer for those who choose to use them. Interviewees did not identify many weaknesses of HOT lanes; rather, they brought up operational issues related to the change from HOV to HOT. Some typical comments included:

¹ Two separate questions were asked in the interview related to the use of tolls to raise revenue and tolls for congestion management purposes. It was clearly understood among interviewees that toll revenue would be used to pay off the bonds that finance construction of the tolled facility, making the toll a user fee.

“In the long term, reliance on gas tax is not sustainable. Consumption is declining...”

“If the public is not willing to tax, then this is a good option...we pay our fair share.”

“Public acceptance will be difficult for revenue generation purposes. They’re already paying taxes. Why toll?”

“Travelers would be made aware of the economics of their travel decisions...”

“If you do dynamic tolling, then there is better mobility and reliability...it’s efficient.”

“There’s a lot of abuse of HOV. How will we manage it?”

Strengths and Weaknesses of Using Tolls

Following is a collection of the comments from interviewees regarding the strengths and weaknesses of using tolls. The comments about using tolls for revenue generation are listed first, followed by comments about tolling for congestion management. Comments also are grouped into categories that reflect the general nature of the comment.

Tolling for Revenue Generation

Strengths	Weaknesses
Tax versus Toll	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the public is not willing to tax, then this is a good option. We want it to be fair – we pay our fair share – like a user fee. • You don’t have to raise other taxes. It’s easier to get support for tolls than for taxes. • In the long term, reliance on gas tax is not sustainable. Consumption is declining with hybrid cars. • You can target major projects – leverage toll money with other local funds. Target big projects. • Tolling really means that you get the project sooner rather than later. • For very expensive projects tolls are appropriate and fair. • Don’t go into tolling with the thought of getting a lot of revenue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In today’s dollars, will tolling ever pay debt service? • Don’t go into tolling with the thought of getting a lot of revenue. • Tolls on specific facilities reduce the case for a tax to address a statewide transportation system. Voters won’t support an additional tax once they start paying tolls for “their” roads.

Tolling for Revenue Generation (continued)

Strengths	Weaknesses
Operational Factors	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tolls also can pay for operations. • Be efficient in collection and moving traffic through the toll area. Leave space for an approach on both sides (bridge). • It can induce carpool (if they ride free or reduced toll). • Travelers would be made aware of the economics of their travel decisions – it would force a mode choice. • Done right, it could make a difference. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Costly to staff the facility. Slows traffic down. • If you toll one route, then the nearest parallel would get all the traffic. This also could be a safety issue. • If the focus is only on revenue, then bus, van and carpools aren't a prioritized and you're not looking at multiple goals.
Fairness/User Pays	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a direct relationship between what you use and what you pay – where and when. It's fair and reasonable. • Pay as you go. If you choose it, you pay. • Shifting users from general purpose lanes to an HOT lane benefits those who don't use it. • It's philosophically good because you raise some revenue from people who benefit. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fairness is an issue if it's the only alternative. • I live on the west side of the Sound. We're used to paying for a ferry. That's really a toll. Our run subsidizes more than its cost to support less profitable runs. • Charging a toll invalidates the land use decisions. When people purchase lower-cost homes in outlying areas, they make a decision to spend their time rather than their money (for a closer-to-work home). This gives rise to a legitimate outcry when the rules are changed (by charging a toll for what was previously "free"). • Depending on the users' income level, it can be the most regressive form of taxation.
Public Acceptance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sends a clear message that there is inadequate funding for transportation. • It acknowledges that the transportation system has limited capacity. With tolls you meter usage through fees. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptance of the technological shift or the pain of implementation. Toll facility users must use a technology that wasn't needed before the toll. For some, that step can be daunting. • Biggest obstacle is people don't like tolls. We're not from the east coast. Even though technology makes it more efficient, it will take getting used to. • Public acceptance will be difficult for revenue generation purpose – they're already paying taxes. Why toll? • People have to get used to paying for it. Be prepared for sticker shock. Transportation has been so cheap for so long. There's no good mass transit. • Problem with tolling on I-5 is how do you package tolling for an old, paid-for road?

Tolling for Congestion Management

Operational Factors

Strengths

- If you do dynamic tolling, then there is better mobility and reliability, which equals an advantage to carpool, vanpool and bus. It's efficient.
- It's efficient. Reduce congestion without new construction.
- Some people will choose mass transit to take advantage of the HOT lane by paying transit fare rather than toll.

Weaknesses

- HOT is sometimes difficult from an engineering perspective. There's a lot of abuse of HOV. How will we manage it?
- Tolling would be wasteful if it is a new highway. People already violate HOV lane restrictions. It could be a safety issue.
- Economics drive a lot of decisions. People will be driven to mass transit. The new facility could go without sufficient revenue to pay the debt.

Fairness/User Pays

- The only type of congestion pricing that's good is HOT lane because there is an alternative to paying the toll.
- Theoretically this is the highest value use, the best use of resources for goods movement. We have not seen good analysis on system management and freight. What pricing mechanisms work? Tolling freight has other implications.
- Congestion management with free parallel lanes is OK. We don't have a problem with HOT lanes.

- Equity – captive audience. If they don't have an option, there will be problems
- If it's not done right, then fairness and mobility (multiple modes) will be an issue.
- Little concern for lower-income people. They already pay a higher proportion of taxes. We have the most regressive tax structure in the country.
- The big kicker is if there are no alternatives. There are no other mode choices.
- A huge hot button in the 90s was when Public-Private partnerships were proposed. There was strong opposition. The State Patrol had to keep order in the hearing room.
- The concept of paying more at one time of day.

Public Acceptance

- I'd like to change the name – discuss it as “congesting pricing” rather than “congestion management.”
- Don't have the toll in effect during off-peak. Then they're paying to enter a particular zone at a specific time. This would be more easily accepted by the public – their decision.
- It's a cultural change. Folks in our state are tired of traffic. It's really bad and they're ready for it.
- Communication is the key.
- HOT lanes should be tested. Will it be widespread or only in certain areas? Target projects where it makes sense for efficiency.
- HOT lanes are less objectionable than full toll road.
- The alternative parallel route is an escape valve for political steam. You pay with time instead of money.
- Public more willing to accept the cost for congestion pricing.

- People adapt to change slowly. They're not going to accept it.
- Don't use HOT lanes as a stick to get people out of cars.
- Don't use revenue for other than road-related operation and capacity purposes.

Educate the Public

A significant number of comments were related to raising public awareness about tolling – from the need for it to the obstacles preventing it, to operational features that interviewees thought the public would like or dislike. Certainly the approach to communicating about tolls could make or break the program. Citing the failed attempt to implement tolling through public-private partnerships in the 1990s, some interviewees believe a one-project-at-a-time approach would be more likely to succeed in gaining public acceptance.

Find Champions and Identify Potential Opposition

Interviewees, themselves, were relatively well informed about the interest in implementing tolling in Washington. However, they were often hard pressed to know what might form the basis for opposition to tolling because the concept has not been widely publicized. The only public response to tolling to date has been reaction to the attempt at public-private toll projects in the 1990s and the decision to toll the new span of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge to finance its construction. So much of what interviewees anticipated in the way of future public response about tolling was based on their observation of these experiences.

Supporters	Opponents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't know yet – it's not tested. • Mayor of Vancouver, Royce Pollard, likes the user fee concept and recognizes the constraints in the corridor to manage congestion. • Environmentalists are likely to support it if it is implemented fairly. • Environmentalists will understand the positive effect on pollution. • Transportation planners. • State patrol will be an ally on safety issues, but how hard are you making their enforcement job? • Business will support it. They need transportation improvements to meet their business goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trucking Industry – British Columbia to Tijuana. • Trucking industry will be fickle. • Vancouver – captive audience for Columbia River crossings much like Gig Harbor. 60,000 people commute from Vancouver to Oregon every workday. • Some people might like the idea until they have to pay the toll. • In the 1990s local action groups opposed the public-private toll projects and might do so again. Source of opposition was the perception that the corporations would be enriched in the paying of the tolls. • Community-based organizations and advocacy groups – for their constituencies it is another hit they can't afford. They're already paying a higher proportion of their income for daily living costs. • Anti-tax folks. • Initiative writers and talk radio hosts who pump people up with false statements. • Maybe AAA. They won't want tolls on existing facilities. • Fiscal conservatives will say they've already paid.

It is generally believed that it is important to identify “champions” for tolling as implementation of various projects moves forward. However, potential champions also were not easy for interviewers to name. Nevertheless, there were a few potential opponents and supporters identified.

Fairness – Equity on Three Fronts

Interviewees were asked about fairness twice in the formal questions. First, they were asked whether they felt that tolling, overall, was a fair or unfair way of providing financing for transportation projects. The second question deliberately asked them to consider whether tolls placed a disproportionate financial burden on minorities and economically disadvantaged groups. But by far the greatest concern voiced about equity could be called “geographic equity.” This type of equity has at its source the idea that a captive group (on the Kitsap Peninsula, in the case of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge; and on one side of the Columbia River, in the case of Vancouver) should not be unfairly burdened with a toll that only they have to pay.

On the fairness of tolling in general, most interviewees thought that tolls are fair, but often added a caveat to their response, such as:

“Depends, it should be an added part of a revenue package. Roadways are like utilities. Everyone uses them. How do you determine who pays and how much?”

“Philosophically, if you’re a user, you should pay more than someone who doesn’t use it. If one region goes to tolling, what are the implications for the rest of the State?”

“Modest tolling is not unfair. You could provide a subsidy for older people or poor people based on frequency.”

“It depends how you implement it. Don’t just shift congestion and environmental/social impacts to other routes.”

“Gas tax is more fair.”

“The devil is in the details. What can you use the money for? In the geographic area? On transit?”

“With caveats: that the tolling is in response to constraints in the corridor to manage congestion, and that it assures a structured process to address all issues.”

“It’s fair because there are more choices.”

“If I had my druthers, I’d say no.”

Regarding a potential disproportionate financial burden placed by tolls, some interviewees mentioned this possibility even before they were asked. None felt that tolling was inherently unfair to anyone, but that the potential for unfairness should be addressed up front so that there is a ready response if there is a need to take specific action in any individual community. The key for many was to offer options so that the toll facility is framed as a choice. Several people did mention that they thought that a toll is like a sales tax – regressive in nature. Some comments:

“Should everyone pay? We (who use the road) all benefit.”

“There’s never a fair tax. It may not be possible to make it fair. People will just have to make a choice.”

“Have components that allow choice and level the playing field.”

“If you tolled everything it would be bad. It’s OK if it’s an option.”

“Mitigate any impacts through the use of revenues. Offer better transit service.”

“Maybe try a reduced fee structure?”

“Just help people move from point A to point B.”

“If you transition to an enterprise system (paying a toll to use the road), then people who receive assistance might qualify for a discount based on some needs-based criteria.”

“HOT lanes are fair. The decision is always yours.”

Criteria for Evaluating Projects for Tolling

As one might expect, interviewees’ criteria for evaluating possible projects for tolling reflected the concerns and interests they raised in other areas of the interview. Together, the comments and suggestions begin to form a loose structure around several possible criteria that answer the questions that interviewers posed. The question posed most frequently was, “Is it politically acceptable?” This question was repeated various ways, indicating the importance of this factor locally, regionally and statewide. The overarching question was, “What are the goals with the toll/project?” Once the goal(s) are established, the following questions and concerns can be seen as a test for determining whether or how a project will meet them.

Public and Political Acceptance

- It has to be politically acceptable in the area.

Benefits

- What safety enhancements would be gained?
- Would it facilitate goods movement?
- Would it help or expand industry?
- Look at economic indicators – would it help the economy?
- Capacity should be increased.
- Does it provide a new facility? Replacement is not as justifiable.
- Improve mobility for the most people.

Feasibility/Practicality

- Tolls have to be easy to collect.
- Make sure there are no other options or no one will use it.
- Is there a viable place to toll?
- Would it pilot a new technology?
- Congestion management projects must have limited access.
- Facility has to be well marked, simple, and efficient.
- Use technology to keep it simple and keep costs down.
- Increase traffic flow and reduce emissions.
- How can tolling make a difference on existing chokepoints?

Financial

- Does the financial modeling indicate that tolling will meet the stated goal?
- Is there another way of funding the project?
- Does funding one project shift impacts to another?
- Using tolls for operations is appropriate.
- It's a matter of timing. Eventually, everyone will get their local project built.
- There has to be a resolution of how we're going to handle transportation funding. Will it be statewide or RTID with tolling authority?

Location

- Where can you make the biggest difference in congestion?
- If widening isn't possible, then would congestion management be a good alternative?
- Look at the total transportation problem and funding mechanisms.
- Are there substitute routes?
- There should be no other route options for a tolled facility.
- How would placing a toll in one area affect others?

Projects That Meet the Criteria

After interviewees had offered some criteria that reflected their priorities, they were asked again about the projects they had identified as possible tolling projects. Did they still seem appropriate after considering them against the yardstick they had just named? Many people believed the projects they had originally named could stand the test of the criteria they had mentioned. The candidates are:

Puget Sound Area

- I-5 from downtown to Northgate – Figure out a way for a new lane, then tweak it to make it politically acceptable.
- I-405 for its entire length (HOT pilot).
- I-90 from Seattle to Issaquah.
- I-90 across the Cascades.
- SR 167 – Extend and add capacity.
- I-90 and 520 bridges (These were often named in tandem because of the belief that one could not succeed as a toll project without the other because of expected toll avoidance behavior.).
- Alaskan Way Viaduct.

Clark County/Vancouver

- I-5 and I-205 in Vancouver.
- Columbia River bridges.

What Should be Done to Address Concerns About Tolling?

Finally, interviewees were asked, “What one thing should be done to address the concerns people might have about tolling?” Responses to this question related to two primary areas, public acceptance and operational issues/suggestions.

Public Acceptance	Operations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The need to have a plan. • The plan should offer a clear picture of expectations and goals. • They should articulate to the public what those expectations and goals are. Example: SR 167 toll project will maximize the use of the free lanes. • Establish a long lag time. Sensitize the public that tolling is coming. • Start with a project people understand. • No ambiguity. • People aren’t going to like paying tolls. • Make sure people understand what they’re getting for their tolls. • Get better at explaining the issues. Some will consider it a double tax. Be up front about problems. • Have a structured public process that includes the business community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do it in a way that one region doesn’t feel they’re singled out. • Explain how the electronic device works. • Give options for tourists. • Number and location of access points is important. • Try a vehicle miles tax – Germans use it on heavy vehicles. • Don’t repeat the mistakes of TNB – net gain is one HOV. • For HOT lanes, provide incentives to get cars into the lane. • WSDOT should stay the course. They’re heading in the right direction: implement tolling in places where it makes sense, like the 167 HOT lanes, Hood Canal Bridge, 520 Bridge. • In the last couple of years WSDOT has listened – like replacing the Hood Canal bridge ahead of time and budget. • First improvements should be additional general-purpose lanes on I-5, I-405, and I-90. • If the RTIDs have the power to levy taxes then they could become the only game in town – the power will be where the money is. • Adopt a set of guidelines and a structured process to help agencies around the State that are making transportation decisions. Identify criteria that must be addressed – a checklist. • First, have a level playing field.

■ Situation Analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

Identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats is an effective format for building a thorough inventory of issues facing WSTC as it seeks to establish a statewide tolling framework. It takes the perceptions provided by interviewees and synthesizes them so that they become useful and actionable.

Strengths

The time for tolling has come. The legislature has recognized it and Washington is among the first states (if not the first) to attempt to establish a framework to guide the selection and implementation of tolling projects. The results of the comprehensive tolling study have the potential to guide this effort toward a comprehensive framework for a system of toll roads with interoperable electronic toll collection systems. Some strengths that will support the study's goals are described below.

Two toll projects already underway can serve as real-life success stories. The high visibility of the Tacoma Narrows Bridge and its successful execution thus far are great strength for the prospect of implementing tolling statewide. A successful marketing phase and launch will raise interest and awareness throughout the State – both on tolling and on electronic toll collection. The SR 167 HOT lane project will serve as the second example of tolling, and will introduce the HOT lane concept to the State of Washington.

Tolling is seen as the way of the future – but not a panacea. There was awareness among several interviewees that even projects with a toll component as part of a financing package cannot be built on tolls alone. A combination of funds, including taxes, will be required to make most projects feasible, and to allow for tolls low enough that they don't price the project out of the market.

A plan for statewide tolling would make individual projects fair. As was evidenced by Tacoma Narrows Bridge, any single proposal could be viewed as unfair. The statewide tolling framework provides a potentially welcome response to the concern that a specific geographic area is paying a disproportionate share while others get “their projects” build through tax dollars.

Weaknesses

There are no tolling champions. Outside of the obvious interest groups (such as transportation planners and economic development advocates) there were no groups who came to mind as advocates for tolling and/or transportation improvements. There also were no advocates identified at the state level who could champion the concept. To the extent that there are recognizable champions, they should be identified. A champion can

be the person to carry the banner for tolling projects, and speak up when misinformation is circulated by detractors.

There is little public knowledge about tolling for congestion management. Most interviewees believe that public is not well informed about congestion management tolling. And even though most interviewees knew about the Commission's tolling study, they voiced concerns about implementation (especially of HOT lanes) that revealed their lack of knowledge about electronic toll collection and the operation of HOT lanes. Introducing HOT lanes must address the lack of a local reference point about how such projects will work.

Opportunities

There is still time to frame tolling vis-à-vis the future economy of the State. The information void about tolling provides opportunity on two fronts. Funding improvements to existing facilities as well as new projects is important beyond what is obvious to most citizens. As a trade-dependent state, Washington's entire economy depends on a viable transportation system. An understanding of the importance of this factor is very important, and can be a part of the framing of tolling in the State of Washington, whose thriving ports face worldwide competition.

Information void about tolling. The Commission, in communicating about the study, and WSDOT, in communicating about specific tolling projects moving forward have the means to brand and position tolling firmly on the side of the public good – as a practical, fair way to bring projects to life that had languished for decades without sufficient resources.

Public awareness is high about the need for safety improvements. Although many major projects have languished for at least a couple of decades, the need for improvements has been raised recently through revelations about the potential for failure of the SR 520 Bridge. This was reflected in interviewees' comments about safety being a primary criterion for determining which projects should be considered for tolling. Interviewees also mentioned the fact that the condition of the SR 520 Bridge had helped to generate support for other projects that pose safety concerns – especially in the event of an earthquake.

Threats

There currently are no interest groups formed specifically to support or oppose toll roads in Washington. (At least interviewees were unable to identify any.) The threat to tolling comes in the possibility of overlooking potential issues and misreading or underestimating community concerns. Among the possible threats to the successful implementation of the recommendations of the tolling study is the defeat of the attempted gas tax repeal, since people may feel that the revenue issue is now “solved.”

Information void could be filled by detractors. The flip side of the coin regarding the information void about tolling is the opportunity it offers to others. It could become a threat in the form of detractors to specific projects or opponents of tolling in general. Either could gain an upper hand in the presence of such a void, and could fill it with rhetoric to suit their cause.

We have the tax now. Why do we need tolls? When the gas tax hike faced possible repeal, several interviewees anticipated its passage as a boost to the introduction of tolling statewide. Likewise, its defeat also could cause people to believe that the retention of the tax revenue will solve Washington's gridlock. If such a belief were to take hold, it could stand in the way of public acceptance of the tolling solution.

■ Preliminary Recommendations

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, when viewed together, reveal a potential strategic path that will help establish a statewide framework for tolling. Strengths and opportunities include the “right track” that WSDOT is on with regard to execution on the TNB project and the widespread desire for transportation improvements. Weaknesses and threats include the absence of a champion for tolling, and the information void about tolling. The preliminary recommendations that follow reflect ways in which the opportunities and strengths can be put to work to overcome the weaknesses and threats.

Do it right, and even credible detractors can be won over or positioned appropriately. Do it wrong, and the detractors will end up with their message in the lead, and toll projects potentially DOA.

Ensure success on TNB and publicize it. The Tacoma Narrows Bridge project is the best possible publicity for tolling in Washington. Ensuring broad distribution of transponders in advance of opening will go far to quell the perception that Gig Harbor people don't like paying to use the bridge. If other Washingtonians see this as a success, and hear people talk about its convenience, which will be more powerful than any example of success from some other state like California, Florida, or Minnesota. Likewise, the 167 HOT Lane project's implementation should be portrayed as an important demonstration project that is successfully moving forward with public and commuter support.

Raise public awareness about tolling. This is a simple proposition with enormous consequences. Every interviewer said that gaining public support for tolling and specific toll projects was essential for tolling to succeed in the State. Many of them acknowledged that it was the one thing that should be done to ensure the successful implementation of tolling. It means branding tolling in terms that are meaningful and relevant to citizens, identifying their preferences for local projects, expressing the benefits, winning over detractors, involving citizens in the statewide effort from grass roots to the state level,

responding and inoculating on the fairness and equity issues, and remaining vigilant for signs of discontent so that issues don't become crises.

Identify local projects with the most local and statewide support. With fairness a primary concern of interviewees, attention should be given to identifying the projects with the most support, as well as the local projects with the most support from citizens throughout the State. Some people viewed the implementation of tolling in different areas throughout the State as a way of leveling the playing field and making tolling fair.

Develop proactive community outreach and participation for statewide tolling. As communication strategies about tolling are implemented, a framework for citizen involvement should be devised that includes local groups as well as a statewide citizens group. These groups could be a formal part of the tolling framework. Local citizen committees can help broaden support for tolling and keep WSDOT apprised of local issues and concerns as projects move forward.

**Comprehensive Tolling Study Ascertainment
Stakeholder Interviewee List**

Steve Appel	Washington Farm Bureau
Jeannie Beckett	Port of Tacoma
Rick Bender	Washington State Labor Council
Jeff Brody	Bremerton Sun
Don Brunnell	Association of Washington Business
Stan Finkelstein	Association of Washington Cities
Robert Frank	Everett Herald
Mark Hallenbeck	University of Washington and Washington State Transportation Center
Peter Hurley	Transportation Choices
Pat Jones	Washington Public Ports Association
John Okamoto	Port of Seattle
Mary Place	Yakima Councilwoman and Immediate Past President, Association of Washington Cities
Larry Pursley	Washington Trucking Associations
Janet Ray	AAA
Thayer Rorabaugh	City of Vancouver Transportation Services
Karen Schmidt	Freight Mobility Strategic Investment Board

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Washington State Comprehensive Tolling Study

Ascertainment Questionnaire

Stakeholders/Community Leaders

Thank you for taking the time to visit with us today.

1. First of all, how closely have you been following the issue of using tolls to help finance or manage traffic on new or upgraded roads and bridges in the State – very closely, somewhat closely or not very closely?

Very closely.....1
 Somewhat closely.....2
 Not very closely.....3

2. Looking at the area of the State where you live or do business, are there transportation problems that you want to have solved? How about other areas of the State?

3. Are you aware of any projects that have been discussed for years, but that have not been built yet for one reason or another? (If so, name projects or areas.)

4. Among the traffic or transportation problems you just named, do you think any of them are more important than any others? Which ones, and why?

5. Are you aware of state legislation requiring the State Transportation Commission to look at the merits of tolling in Washington?

[If yes] When you first heard this – was your first impression positive or negative?

Positive 1

Negative 2

6. Among the traffic problems you first mentioned, do you think any of them might be good candidates for a toll project?

7. As you see it, what are the strengths and weaknesses of raising revenues for transportation projects through tolling? First the positive things.

8. And what do you see as the negatives?

9. As you see it, what are the strengths and weaknesses of using tolling to manage traffic? First the positive things.

10. And what do you see as the negatives?

11. As you talk to people in your community, is there any group individual who you feel would oppose tolling?

12. All in all, do you feel that tolling is a fair or unfair way of providing financing for transportation projects?

Fair1
Unfair2

IF UNFAIR, ASK:

13. And what makes it unfair?

14. Some people say that tolls place a disproportionate financial burden on minorities and economically disadvantaged groups. Others say that tolls are a fair way of having users pay for what they use. As you think about the issue, do you feel that tolling can be implemented in a way that is fair to users and non-users of all income levels? (IF YES: How do you feel that could be done?) (IF NO: Why do you feel that can't be done?)

Yes: _____

No: _____

15. If you were on the Transportation Commission charged with recommending some projects for tolling, what criteria do you feel should be used in evaluating whether or not tolling should be used in a particular area?

16. Now let's talk again about the problems you mentioned, and the projects you thought might be good candidates for tolling. Considering the criteria you just mentioned, do you still think those projects would be good candidates? [Repeat areas or problems raised earlier in #6.]

17. If the State were to change one thing about tolling that would do the most to address the concerns people might have about tolling, what would that one thing be?

18. This process of deciding which other roads and bridges, if any, should involve tolls will be playing out for some time yet to come. Would you like to stay abreast of the progress of this issue in the State, or not? (IF YES:) And what would be the best way to stay in touch with you? (WRITE NAME AND PHONE, E-MAIL ADDRESS, REGULAR MAILING ADDRESS, ETC.)

19. Periodically we may bring people together in small groups to discuss this issue. Would you ever like to be a part of such a group? (IF SO, GET PHONE, E-MAIL OR ADDRESS IF NOT CAPTURED IN Q 12 ABOVE.)

20. We are interested in talking to additional opinion leaders such as yourself in your community. Who else would you recommend that we talk to about this issue? (GET NAMES AND GET PHONE NUMBERS IF POSSIBLE.)

That completes our interview. Thank you for helping us.

Background paper prepared by Frank Wilson and Associates, Inc., with assistance from Cambridge Systematics, Inc. in January 2006.

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