



TTAG February 25, 2016 Meeting Summary

Attendees:

Jaymes McClain	Whatcom Council of Governments [WCOG]
Sylvia Goodwin	Port of Bellingham
Lethal Coe	WCOG
Becky Kelly	Whatcom Transportation Authority [WTA]
Gary Davis	Whatcom County
Rollin Harper	Everson, Nooksack, Sumas
Kevin Renz	City of Ferndale
John Shambaugh	Washington State Department of Transportation [WSDOT]
Joe Rutan	Whatcom County
Chris Comeau	City of Bellingham
Bob Wilson	WCOG
Hugh Conroy	WCOG
Jay Drye	WSDOT
Keri Shepherd	Nooksack Tribe
Bill Bullock	City of Blaine
Matt Jensen	Lummi Nation
Faris Al-Memar	WSDOT
Elizabeth Sjostrom	WSDOT
Todd Carlson	WSDOT
Rick Nicholson	WTA
Thomas Noyes	WSDOT

TTAG

Review and consideration of a recommendation to the Policy Board regarding adoption of WCOG's *Development and Evaluation Process for Comprehensive Plan Transportation Elements*. Action Item.

Hugh Conroy continued last meeting's discussion regarding the process of WCOG certifying the consistency and conformity of comprehensive plan transportation elements with respect to the Growth Management Act [GMA] and WCOG's regional transportation plan. To research the question from last meeting – whether it was feasible or conventional for policy boards to certify plan elements after adoption – WCOG staff looked at the Puget Sound Regional Council's [PSRC] documented process. Mr. Conroy reviewed the process timeline as presented in the current draft (distributed to TTAG).



Hugh Conroy added a paragraph after the *Process and Timeline* table in the certification process document that explains next steps if a comprehensive plan transportation element is deemed nonconforming or inconsistent.

Chris Comeau moved to approve the certification process document for recommendation to the WTPB. Joe Rutan seconded. The motion was unanimously approved.

WSDOT CSI Workshop

Review meeting purpose and objectives

John Shambaugh described the purpose of the Washington State Department of Transportation's [WSDOT] Corridor Sketch Initiative [CSI] workshop. After interviewing jurisdictions in the region individually and getting focused responses to their transportation needs, this workshop aims to gather feedback on transportation corridors in the region from multiple perspectives and outline jurisdictions' performance goals for the transportation system.

Todd Carlson reviewed a CSI diagram in the meeting packet. He said that the group should think about three things during this process: leveraging funds, working together - especially at the metropolitan planning organization [MPO] level, and identifying performance gaps and needs.

Overview of the regional transportation system and state transportation issues

Lethal Coe overviewed the regionally significant transportation system as it is currently identified. Through planning and discussion with TTAG and the Citizen's Transportation Advisory Group [CTAG], the regional system was defined for the 2012 WCOG regional transportation plan. The system, made up of transportation routes recognized as highly important to regional mobility, provides a scaled framework to evaluate transportation projects and their benefits to the region.

WCOG uses the base year 2013 to model current transportation conditions using the regional transportation model. For the WCOG regional transportation plan update, they are forecasting out to the year 2040. Data that are output from the 2040 model are estimates based on current conditions, expected land-use changes, and anticipated transportation projects. The transportation modeling is used as a tool to guide current planning discussions and, due to changing technology, funding availability, policies, and other variables, is not presented as a precise depiction of the transportation network in 20 years.

Mr. Coe presented on modeled traffic volume and volume-over-capacity ratio [VOC] data. With outputs mapped on WCOG's GIS web portal, he noted some points of interest between the 2013 and 2040



figures. The modeling shows increased congestion on roads in the northern county cities in 2040. East-to-west county connections show a similar trend. He also reviewed employment and household growth in the county up to 2040.

Overview of stakeholder interviews and findings

Elizabeth Sjostrom said that WSDOT is looking at updating its Highway System Plan, and the input from local jurisdictions regarding specific challenges and needs on the transportation network in their respective areas will help inform that process. She said that they are changing the way they approach their planning for the future, implementing more of a practical-design approach where more focus is given to the context of the issues on the network, not just the problems. Since 1999, WSDOT has invested \$1.4BN in the Whatcom County region, Ms. Sjostrom said, and it is safe to say that that level of funding will not be available any time soon.

Ms. Sjostrom presented a hardcopy map that pinpoints areas of interest on the transportation network as outlined by the individual interviews that she and Hugh Conroy conducted with local jurisdictions. The map points to areas where mobility is working well and not well, where there are challenges, where there are modal connection issues, and where future funded projects are scheduled to take place. Using the summaries of each jurisdiction's interview, a list of themes relating to the transportation network was created and attached in the meeting packet.

Ms. Sjostrom highlighted a couple themes from the interviews. One reoccurring point was the lack of a state route [SR] that adequately connects the county east to west.

One outcome of the Corridor Sketch Initiative will be a database, Mr. Sjostrom noted. In WSDOT's planning processes, they usually only look at WSDOT-owned roads, but now they are expanding that to include local roads that have regional significance.

Todd Carlson reminded the group that these discussions are not only for the benefit of the jurisdictions in mapping out regional needs and gaps in the transportation network, but for WSDOT in helping inform their regional offices and defining performance measures.

Faris Al-Memar commented that maximum throughput is what WSDOT uses as a performance measure for traffic congestion. He said that for the Corridor Sketch Initiative, WSDOT is identifying needs around the state. They will rank those needs and then create strategies and solutions as part of phase 2 of the initiative, tying the needs and strategies to some kind of performance goal. Elizabeth Sjostrom added that they're using VOCs as one performance measure to help identify needs throughout this process.



Stakeholder participation

The group discussed ideas about how the state can work with jurisdictions on improving routes that have regional significance but are not state routes.

The group recognized the importance of connections to Bellingham, where 80 percent of the region's employment exists, Ms. Sjoström stated. She noted how there currently is no good origin-destination data for regional trips, but there is general knowledge about the role of transportation connections to Bellingham that people use to access employment and services.

Lethal Coe reiterated earlier questions about WSDOT's definition of "corridor" as it relates to this initiative. John Shambaugh said that WSDOT is trying to be more holistic with their approach to the region's needs and are letting local jurisdictions define what they see as their respective corridor connections.

Rick Nicholson said that transportation is changing now and will continue to change into the future, such as driverless cars and transportation network companies like Uber. He posed the question of how all those variables fit into the equation for planning for the future and how we can move forward and still remain flexible.

Chris Comeau reiterated Mr. Nicholson's point. The regional transportation model is built on assumptions and forecasts out to a time that no one knows will look like, he said. He wondered how we can do a better job moving people when the future of mobility is largely unknown. There will be different transportation options, but he noted that the solution does not always have to be expanding road capacity. System plans, he continued, always try to reduce congestion on the highway, but they will always eventually fail. He suggested adopting the assumption that during peak periods there will be congestion on major road networks. There is no strategy to promise less congestion, Mr. Comeau said.

Hugh Conroy said that the regional transportation model is based on best predictions of land-use right now. They can test changing scenarios in the model, but he agreed that broader analysis is needed.

Gary Davis suggested that the group look at the corridors as being in different categories. In some places the state route is not the main connection but is maybe a local access point (or an obstruction in some cases). John Shambaugh agreed with Mr. Davis' point. They can look at the corridors and their respective purposes and connection points, Mr. Shambaugh said.

The group discussed CSI corridor 248, which consists of SR 546 and SR 9 through Sumas. Bill Bullock said that at the last International Mobility and Trade Corridor program [IMTC] meeting, US Customs and Border Protection [US CBP] and Canada Border Services Agency [CBSA] mentioned possible changes to



the functionality of broker-dependent border-crossing locations for commercial trucks. In the future (and in a limited capacity currently) the driver or company dispatch may be able choose their preferred border crossing regardless of the port-of-entry listed on preliminary entry forms. This could create a need for a better east-west connection for trucks choosing a border-crossing based on congestion, he said. Rollin Harper also commented on the border, saying that congestion on Cherry St (SR 9) in Sumas due to border queues makes it difficult for local east-west access across the road. He added that local roads in Sumas that are not part of the state system are the designated route for commercial trucks to use to queue up for the border. Hugh Conroy suggested expanding the list of numbered corridors beyond state routes – in this case between CSI corridors 248 and 277 (SR 546/E Badger Rd and SR 544/E Pole Rd) where currently there are none.

Rollin Harper brought up transit connection issues between the Colombia Valley area and northern county cities like Sumas and Lynden, commenting that there are currently no routes that directly link these destinations for people commuting to work or going into town for services.

Joe Rutan suggested looking more at the corridors that cross the Nooksack River. Currently there are only a handful of access points, causing traffic to funnel to these locations.

There were discussions regarding SR 9 and congestion along this corridor. Rollin Harper discussed the choke point caused by the intersection of SR 544 and SR 9 in Nooksack, where local backups can occur, especially with the railroad crossing there. Sylvia Goodwin commented on commercial trucks using SR 9, saying that the road isn't necessarily engineered for big trucks to use as a main route.

In response to discussions about access to Bellingham, Chris Comeau told the group that the city is creating a transportation system for people to come to Bellingham and move around in it, not necessarily through it. He added that some roads are being built narrower and are being retrofitted for more bicycle-pedestrian facilities. People shouldn't expect free flow traffic at peak travel times, Mr. Comeau said. This is the direction Bellingham has been going in for past decade. Joe Rutan added to Mr. Comeau's comments, saying that the county is also focusing on safety and widening shoulders but is not necessarily trying to create larger multi-lane road networks. Chris Comeau said that in addition to car volume as a part of Bellingham's Level of Service [LOS] measurement, they also look at bicycle-pedestrian connectivity, transit ridership and frequency, and other factors such as multi-use trails. The Whatcom Transportation Authority [WTA] and Bellingham have been coordinating with each other, especially during WTA's strategic plan update process, about getting people into Bellingham from the county, Mr. Comeau said.

Rick Nicholson said that there are different standards for productivity for urban and rural ridership on WTA buses. Rural service is expensive and is constrained by funding, but those routes are extremely well used. He continued that there is a lack of park-and-ride locations in the county. Chris Comeau added



that transportation benefit districts [TBDs], where jurisdictions in a certain area can chip in to fund transit routes, could be a strategy for funding better connections (Bellingham voted in a TBD, and Ferndale has a similar one).

Hugh Conroy asked if there is potential for transit infrastructure upgrades on the network. Chris Comeau replied that Bellingham has a couple queue jumps for transit, which helps during congestion. Rollin Harper said that such strategies might only be applicable in Bellingham.

Kevin Renz talked about some of Ferndale's transportation issues. He said that Ferndale will continue to be a bedroom community for people who work in Bellingham but seek less expensive housing, so commutes will likely continue to increase. Mr. Renz commented on the dilemma of transit connections within Ferndale, saying they could wait for demand for transit or offer better access to buses that could possibly create the demand.

Hugh Conroy commented that bicycle and pedestrian facilities are mainly considered local systems, but can be very important to the regional system where they provide connections to intermodal facilities like park-and-rides.

Becky Kelly added that WTA connects people to Bellingham from the county, but those people then have to find secondary connections to get where they need to go.

Bill Bullock said that the border has a large effect on Blaine's transportation. SR 543, when backed up with cross-border freight congestion, cuts off the city from east to west at H St and Boblett St. The Blaine ports-of-entry combined are among the highest volume crossings on the northern border. Border efficiency ties in with how transportation in Blaine operates. Mr. Bullock continued, saying that since people can't go more than a mile or two on a bicycle in Blaine, there is not a bicycle culture like there is in Bellingham.

Phase 2: Developing strategies

Todd Carlson said that WSDOT is trying to knit together corridors to solve problems regionally. The end-game may not be in sight, he said, but they want to find strategies for long-term solutions and have local jurisdictions' input be integrated into WSDOT's planning instead of WSDOT simply creating a plan and having others then comment on it. He continued that this will happen incrementally, and there'll be ongoing conversations outside of group meetings like this one.

Faris Al-Memar added that he'd like WSDOT to coordinate more in the future with MPO directors.