

Gas prices and the recession can't take all the credit for reduced congestion

Local News

Posted by: David Haviland

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OLYMPIA - Washington drivers are spending less time stuck in traffic despite growing vehicle volumes during peak commute periods in urban areas, according to a national study released to news media today. WSDOT's own data crunchers attribute the trend to the declining economy, but contend that smart transportation investments and operational strategies are what will keep travel times reasonable well after the economy recovers. The 2009 Urban Mobility Report, a national study released today by the Texas Transportation Institute, announces that congestion is declining or leveling off across the country, and attributes the cause to rising gas prices and the declining economy. WSDOT agrees that commutes are improving, but draws other conclusions as to the cause.

Puget Sound region travel trends are somewhat different than those found nationally. The TTI report draws from 2007 data. For this period, Washington's economy was still very robust and added jobs. Our own congestion data shows continued increases in travel times for key Puget Sound corridors in 2007, although the increase is at a lesser rate than in previous years. The data supports that congestion is improving in part because of Moving Washington, WSDOT's program for addressing congestion. Moving Washington is a three-part strategy comprised of adding highway capacity strategically, operating the system efficiently and managing demand.

"We're fighting congestion with safety improvements, construction projects, advanced freeway operations and providing transportation options," said State Traffic Engineer Ted Trepanier. "While it is clear that many factors influence congestion, there is no question that our strategies are making a positive impact," he said. WSDOT analyzed on seven major Seattle-area commuting corridors in the first six months of 2008, as gas prices surged above \$4 per gallon. While it's true that Washington drivers used 63 million fewer gallons of fuel in the first six months of 2008, peak period volumes still continued to grow on these key commuter routes. The most notable changes in traffic volumes were observed on weekends and evenings as drivers reduced discretionary trips, changed destinations or cut trips to save money. Although congestion remains heavy on several corridors, travel times on six of seven key Puget Sound corridors either improved or remained level for the first half of 2008, compared to 2007. Four of seven major corridors saw increased traffic volumes during peak periods, yet six corridors experienced better travel times as traffic flow improved and disruptions declined. Improved travel times through some of the region's busiest corridors suggest that WSDOT's congestion relief strategies and their associated projects, combined with higher gas prices and rising transit ridership, had a positive effect on the performance of these corridors in the first six months of 2008. WSDOT is currently delivering the largest capital construction program in our state's history, including hundreds of safety and congestion relief projects funded by the 2003 and 2005 gas tax, worth \$6.5 billion. As of June 30, WSDOT has completed 192 of 391 projects with an additional 83 projects currently under construction. Combined, these projects represent 70% of the total number of projects for both the Nickel and TPA programs. WSDOT publishes an annual congestion report that provides detailed travel time and traffic delay analysis and highlights "Before and After" case studies of its safety and congestion relief projects. It measures the results from the driver's perspective for each completed project. In King County, WSDOT

widened the freeway and improved interchanges on I-405 between Kirkland and Bothell. This \$82 million project, the first of the multi-stage Kirkland Nickel project, was completed in October 2007. Based on travel speeds before and after the project was completed, drivers' speeds have increased by 16%, from 37 mph to 43 mph. The Tukwila to Bellevue morning commute improved by 12 minutes in part due to new WSDOT auxiliary lane on I-405, opened in early 2009. WSDOT recently completed one of the largest construction projects ever delivered in Snohomish County, the \$263.4 million I-5 Everett HOV and Freeway Expansion project. This project combined added capacity, safety and operational improvements by adding HOV lanes to demonstrate that our Moving Washington strategy can reap big benefits. Before the project began in 2005, afternoon commuters headed northbound on I-5 between 128th Street and Marine View Drive spent up to 18 minutes moving through this eight mile stretch of highway. After crews opened the new lanes in May 2008, commuters shaved their commute to 10 minutes. Without congestion, travelers can drive through this section of I-5 in eight minutes. In Clark County, WSDOT widened two miles of I-5 between Salmon Creek and the I-205 interchange. This \$44 million project was one of several aimed at improving traffic flow in the I-5 corridor between the Main Street interchange in Vancouver and the I-205 junction. Result: Drivers' travel speeds have improved 19% from 42 mph to 50 mph. For more information about Moving Washington, visit www.wsdot.wa.gov/movingwashington. For our detailed annual congestion report and the most recent six-month, incremental traffic trend analysis folio go to www.wsdot.wa.gov/accountability/.