

EASTSIDE TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION

“Dedicated to improving our quality of life and the environment by reducing congestion thru increased mobility”

October 12, 2005

Douglas MacDonald, Secretary
Washington State Department of Transportation
PO Box 47316
Olympia, WA 98504-7316

Subject: Preservation of I-90 Use

Dear Secretary MacDonald:

Following up on our letter to you dated April 12, 2005, we encourage DOT to continue its independent study of the I-90 Bridge. By initiating an independent study of capacity and congestion issues on the I-90 Corridor and the impact of changing current operations of the Corridor, we believe that DOT has responded to our request in the last paragraph of our letter which stated:

“Certainly the bottom line of our message to you is for you to assure us that the WSDOT will take on the responsibility to conduct an objective impact assessment of the assumed giveaway of two traffic lanes on I-90 for vast underutilization with exclusive transit use.”

We understand that these studies will be completed in March of 2006.

We were concerned, as noted in our April 12th letter, by the efforts of various political entities which tried to prevent the study from being done by the first amendment to the 1976 I-90 Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) that concluded “the best use of the center roadway is High Capacity Transit (HCT)” without any studies leading to this unfounded decision.

Unfortunately, we are now further concerned that a second amendment to the MOA has been secretly rushed through in an effort not only to undermine the objectivity of this study and influence its outcome but also to influence the results of local elections. This letter to you dated September 8th from Sims, Marshall, Merkle, Ladenburg, and Nickels was introduced into the Mercer Island City Council meeting of October 3rd late at night (9:45pm) under another agenda item. This amendment also introduces the controversial issue of “**congestion based pricing**” on I-90 as a coming event. The residents had no chance to read and comment on it. Some members of the Mercer Island City Council had not even seen it or seen it in its final form before the meeting. It was hurriedly approved and signed without benefit of public availability and comment.

We would again call to your attention that the Sound Transit led study to develop and evaluate alternatives that would modify I-90 to provide two-way priority Transit/HOV operations selected R-8a as the preferred alternative of those evaluated in the draft EIS. R-8a, which squeezed a fourth lane in each direction onto the outer roadways for priority Transit/HOV use, did not change the current operation of the center roadway. Page 3.2-43 of the draft EIS stated quite emphatically:

The Project is not a light rail or High Capacity Transit (HCT) project; it is intended to improve regional express bus transit and HOV operations. If there is a high capacity transit project proposed for I-90 in the future, it would have its own environmental analysis. The project alternatives have been reviewed (only) to determine whether they would be adaptable for a future light rail project.

Despite this disclaimer, the final EIS was released with many references to conversion of the center roadway to exclusive “high capacity transit” (HCT) use. And with absolutely no study or analysis of such an alternative, the WSDOT not only allowed the MOA to be revised accordingly, but was signatory to the revised MOA. We believe the MOA was erroneously revised and may in fact be illegal, having no environmental impact assessment of that change prior to its enactment.

We believe that the public wants reduced congestion by maximizing the overall throughput of the I-90 bridge for all modes of travel. It is hard to visualize how the dedicated use by HCT of the costly center two lanes with five minutes or one mile of wasted space between trains at best due to the downtown tunnel limitation and forcing all non-transit traffic into the existing three general purpose lanes and bringing them to a virtual standstill is a better utilization of the I-90 Corridor than the continued multi-use of the two center lanes with the addition of the outside roadways for priority transit.

Your independent study of capacity and congestion issues on the I-90 Corridor and the impact of changing current operations of the Corridor will allow the public to finally become aware of the increased congestion and traffic delays caused by various operational modes of the I-90 Corridor. We would encourage you to not limit your studies to HCT in the center roadway as suggested by the MOA amendments but to keep BRT with HOV/Mercer Island traffic (current use) combined with the use of the 4th lane in each direction for priority Transit/HOV use (R-8a) as one configuration for evaluation.

The I-90 corridor deserves the same type of analysis that preceded the publicly accepted I-405 ROD. We would further encourage you not to introduce the controversial congestion based pricing into the study. Perhaps then we can make informed policy decisions based on facts rather than out-of-the-blue political decisions that often make things worse.

We look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ward Truess', written over a white background.

Ward Truess, President
Eastside Transportation Association

cc: Dan O’Neal, Chair, State Transportation Commission
Dave Dye, Urban Corridors Administrator
Dan Mathis, FHWA Regional Administrator