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OPINION

New taxes for Sound Transit? Now is not the time | Other Voices



Jim Maclsaac

— Image Credit: Courtesy Photo

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Special to the Reporter

Construction, maintenance and repair of roads and bridges should be the central focus of the state transportation funding package in 2015 without being held hostage to increasing Sound Transit's light rail taxes.

The Puget Sound region's fragile highway infrastructure desperately needs significant investments now to protect what we have and to expand what we need.

No new road funding has been approved since 2005. The region's crumbling roadways are at risk if the neglect continues. Current freeway capacity can barely carry the existing traffic demand, much less accommodate future growth. These urban roadways that carry the majority of our freight and commuters must be expanded to reduce congestion and carbon emissions.

Safety and congestion relieving road projects must be the state's and region's top transportation funding priority. Buses and vanpools also would benefit from these road projects, as they carry 90 percent of all regional transit trips on roads.

Despite the degradation of our roads, and frustration of the vast majority of the region's commuters suffering from severe highway congestion, Sound Transit seeks an additional tax authority from the 2015 Legislature to fund its \$15 billion Stage 3 light rail system. Why now?

Sound Transit has not even finished building the light rail portion of Sound Move Stage 1 authorized by voters over 18 years ago. Stage 1 light rail has already cost taxpayers more than double the initial estimate, is years behind schedule and moves just over one-third of the 107,000 riders promised. Worse, ST 2 taxes have been collected since 2008, its construction has just started and it won't be fully operational until at least 2023. This begs the question: "Why does Sound Transit's board want such a massive increase in sales, property and motor vehicle excise taxes now?"

Existing transit taxes are more than enough, since Sound Transit consumes nearly a third of all transportation revenues in our region.

Light rail only carries about 0.23 percent (less than 1/4 of 1 percent) of the Puget Sound's person trips today. Proponents of the light rail system expansion claim "If we build it, they will come!" However, this is not the case.

PSRC data forecasts light rail ridership will be about 10 percent of daily transit trips, which is only 4.3 percent of the total daily person trips, by 2040. Peak period transit trips are forecast to increase to 5.4 percent. Additionally, only one-fifth of light rail riders are new to using transit, while the rest have simply moved from buses to rail.

Sound Transit is asking for \$15 billion to shift rail ridership from 0.23 percent to a paltry 0.54 percent (about 1/2 of 1 percent) of regional trips. Any new transportation taxes should focus on the 99 1/2 percent of the region's trips that will be on the roads.

The road system's major funding sources, gas taxes and weight fees aren't enough to maintain, preserve or build new projects. Time is overdue for funding the state's critical road needs.

The I-405 and I-5 freeways have several costly hours of miserable congestion every weekday, exemplifying immense strains on our aging and seismically vulnerable road system.

WSDOT has a long list of capacity projects that need funding, including two more lanes on I-405, completing SR 520 in Seattle, critical SR 509 and SR 167 extensions for access to SeaTac Airport and the Port of Tacoma and the US 2 trestle-widening in Everett, among others. WSDOT also has a vast number of preservation projects including reconstruction of the I-5 pavement through Seattle, pavement overlays and bridges all over the state and the court order to replace culverts for fish.

Washington needs responsible investments in road infrastructure for the vast majority of us. Meanwhile, Sound Transit seeks to draw money away from protecting safety, commerce and environmental enhancements in the Puget Sound to support a tiny minority of regional travelers. This imbalance must end in 2015.

James W. MacIsaac, P.E., was chair elect and a member of ETA's board of directors and research committee.