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Local News : Wednesday, September 27, 2000

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Study: New roads not the answer to traffic congestion

By Diane Brooks
Seattle Times Snohomish County bureau

Building roads and widening existing highways can make congestion worse in the long run, not better, according to a new study of 15-year traffic patterns in 70 urban areas of the United States.

In what amounted to a three-pronged offensive against Initiative 745, the Washington Public Interest Research Group (WashPIRG) released its report yesterday at simultaneous news conferences in Seattle, Lynnwood and Tacoma.

"This report clearly shows that just building roads to get us out of traffic takes us in the wrong direction," said Aisling Kerins, a WashPIRG field associate. "We do need to increase how many people our roads are transporting, but we cannot do that by only expanding them."

WashPIRG is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public-interest advocacy organization with more than 27,000 members.

I-745, pushed by Mukilteo businessman Tim Eyman, would require that at least 90 percent of state and local transportation money, including local transit taxes, be spent on road construction and maintenance.

State analysts have said the initiative could shift \$900 million to \$2.2 billion from other transportation projects to roads, depending on whether I-745's language is interpreted to include things such as the state ferry system as "roads."

Eyman yesterday disputed the WashPIRG report's findings. "These are the same people who said the sky would fall under (Initiative) 695, so I don't think they are dripping with credibility," he said, referring to critics in general.

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I-695, also authored by Eyman, slashed car-tab taxes.

For decades, Eyman said, Washington has avoided building new roads, hoping that would keep its population down. But people came anyway, he said.

Alison Wise, author of the report, "Breaking Gridlock: Real Solutions for Transportation Problems," said her research was not triggered by I-745 or I-695. But the current public debate over transit funding has provided a politically-charged backdrop for her findings, she said.

According to the report:

- Metropolitan areas that invested heavily in new road capacity fared no better at easing congestion than areas that did not. Up to 50 percent of traffic in Indianapolis and up to 77 percent of traffic in Louisville has been attributed to road expansions.
- Building new roads attracts new traffic, causing more congestion. For instance, when the state Department of Transportation added a new stretch of Interstate 90 between Bellevue and Seattle in 1989, daily traffic jumped to 104,000 from 65,000 vehicles in the first month. The state observed no corresponding decrease in traffic on Highway 522 or the Highway 520 bridge.
- New roads fill up much more quickly than projected. The Seattle-Everett area increased highway capacity by 44 percent between 1982 and 1997, a period in which population increased only 36 percent. Yet this area recently was rated as the nation's most congested for its population size.
- Road construction causes urban and suburban sprawl. In the five years before I-270 was widened in Maryland, 1,745 new homes were approved in the Rockville community. In the following five years, 13,642 were approved.

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