



**CITY OF KIRKLAND**  
**Department of Public Works**  
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**[www.ci.kirkland.wa.us](http://www.ci.kirkland.wa.us)**

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**To:** Marilynne Beard, Assistant City Manager

**From:** Daryl Grigsby, Public Works Director  
David Godfrey, P.E., Transportation Engineering Manager

**Date:** September 24, 2009

**Subject:** LETTER TO STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION ON SR 520 TOLLING

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the City Council authorize the Mayor to sign the attached letter.

BACKGROUND DISCUSSION:

At their September 23 meeting, the Transportation Commission was briefed by WSDOT staff on the SR 520 tolling project. The Commission was looking for areas where comments from the City might be helpful in furthering Kirkland's interests and improving the project in general.

On October 21, the Washington State Transportation Commission will be deliberating on two issues that our Commission felt deserved comment. The first concerns providing WSDOT staff the authority to alter toll rates. This authority lies with the State Transportation Commission, but if the new tolling has unintended consequences --such as large diversions to other facilities-- it would be helpful if WSDOT could act right away to alter the toll in order to minimize these impacts. One helpful action would be for the Commission to set a range of acceptable tolls within which WSDOT could alter the toll without further Commission approval.

The other issue concerns exemptions from tolling. Private carpools (as opposed to vanpools managed by transit agencies) would not be exempt from tolls under the current WSDOT proposal. At the Kirkland briefing, WSDOT expressed two main reasons for this. One reason was the difficulty in enforcing such a policy. There are no shoulders on SR 520 near the proposed tolling location at the east end of the bridge, so it would be difficult for enforcement to identify or stop violators. The other issue is the relatively short westbound merge where the HOV lane ends near the east end of the bridge. Staff from WSDOT indicated that exempting private carpools would increase the volume in the HOV lane and exacerbate safety problems associated with the merge. The Kirkland Transportation Commission felt the enforcement component makes sense, but the reasoning behind the safety argument should be reconsidered by the State Commission in light of the strong Transportation Demand Management program that will be accompanying the tolling program. This program should strongly encourage private carpools and exempting them from tolling is a way to better manage traffic.

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The Commission is also interested in examining details of the evaluation and mitigation programs that will look at adverse impacts to other facilities such as I-90 and local arterials, along with the TDM program, signing and distribution of transponders for toll collection. The Commission will follow up on these at future meetings. These issues are not being considered by the Washington State Transportation Commission and so they are not addressed in the attached letter.

The attached letter was reviewed and edited by the Transportation Commission. Materials provided by WSDOT at the Transportation Commission meeting are also provided as background and are attached.

# The Federal grants for SR 520 could include:

- \$41 million for transit improvements, including enhanced bus services with the purchase of 45 additional buses for the corridor.
- \$63 million to develop an advanced tolling system that could contribute up to \$500 million toward replacing the aging SR 520 bridges and help manage congestion.
- \$23.1 million for advanced traffic management and traveler information systems to provide real-time traffic information and more reliable trips for drivers.
- \$27.4 million to purchase additional ferries and make improvements at ferry terminals and docks throughout the Puget Sound.
- We will use existing revenue to continue building commute trip reduction programs and encourage employer-based programs that reduce rush-hour-traffic demands such as telecommuting, flexible work schedules, and ride sharing.

## Improvements through the plan



### Timeline

- Spring 2007**
  - Submitted UPA grant application
- Summer 2007**
  - Selected as grant finalist
- Fall 2007**
  - King County received funding for five of six transit projects included in the UPA and new enhanced bus service on SR 520
- Winter/Spring 2008**
  - Tolling and traffic technology concept development
- Summer 2008**
  - Launch an environmental process for a proposal to toll the existing SR 520 floating bridge
- Fall/Winter 2008**
  - Develop design and contracts
  - Meet with local agencies and the public to get comments
- Spring 2009**
  - Legislature approves tolling for the SR 520 bridge
- As early as 2010**
  - Launch the tolling project on SR 520

This partnership also includes you. Your participation is important to us and we welcome your involvement. Look for updates about the status of the UPA program and get more information at [www.wsdot.wa.gov/Congestion/UPA](http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Congestion/UPA).

### For more information, contact

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# The Lake Washington Congestion Management

Spring 2009

To reduce traffic congestion in major urban areas, the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) requested innovative ideas to improve big-city freeway traffic flow through the combined use of transit, technology, telecommuting and tolling – the four T's.

In response to USDOT's request, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) and King County submitted an Urban Partnership Agreement (UPA) grant application to help fund the replacement of the vulnerable SR 520 bridges and reduce congestion along the SR 520 corridor across Lake Washington.

The USDOT selected the UPA plan to receive funding to implement innovative congestion management strategies on SR 520, Interstate 90 and across Lake Washington in the next few years. Managing highway demand is one of the strategies of *Moving Washington*, WSDOT's three-pronged effort to fight congestion. By managing demand, operating more efficiently and adding capacity where it makes sense we can have a transportation system that is responsible, reasonable and sustainable.

Funded by:



U. S. Department of Transportation  
Federal Highway Administration



# Improving congestion on SR 520

There is no single solution to fix traffic congestion along SR 520. The four T strategies in our plan will work together to ensure the free movement of people and goods on SR 520 well into the future of our quickly growing region.

## Transit

Increasing transit services along SR 520 would move more people and provide more options to commuters. Other improvements such as additional park and rides, the use of the King County MetroRapidRide bus rapid transit (BRT) program and better rider information services would make ride sharing more convenient.



A King County Metro bus approaches the Portage Bay Bridge.

## Technology

Existing tools such as ramp meters, traffic sensors embedded in the roadway and changeable message signs would improve traveler information and traffic control. New innovations, such as variable speed limits, improved on- and off-ramp access and real-time traveler information signs would help provide commuters with a more reliable trip.

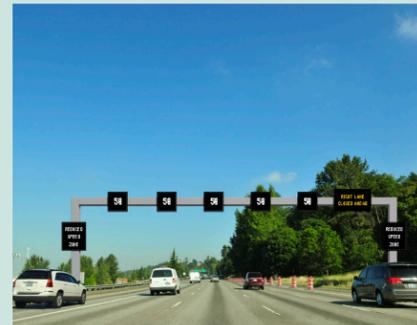
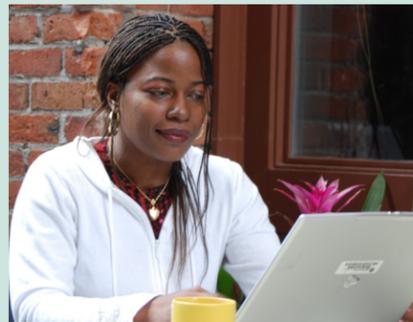


Image of future technology that will be implemented on SR 520 and I-90, including variable speed limits and electronic message boards.

## Telecommuting

Encouraging people to work from home at least part-time and/or adjusting their work schedules to take advantage of lower toll rates during off-peak hours, allows businesses to contribute to the goal of decreasing traffic in this busy corridor. A small change in the number of drivers who choose an alternative to driving alone would have a significant effect on traffic flow.



Many employers recognize the value of allowing employees to telecommute.

## Tolling

Electronic tolls eliminates booths, lines, and delays because drivers would not have to stop to pay. Toll prices that vary by time of day, called variable tolling, would discount bridge travel during less crowded times and charge higher prices during peak travel times. This system would encourage some drivers to choose alternate transportation methods to help ease congestion during peak travel times.



Visualization of a fully electronic tolling system on the SR 520 bridge.

# The partnership's importance

SR 520 is one of two east-west Lake Washington crossings. The corridor is critical to the region's economy and quality of life because it links densely populated and quickly growing cities to some of the largest employers in the state. Because of the region's dependence on SR 520 and its vulnerabilities, the UPA provides a critical component to help replace the aging bridge and to improve SR 520 traffic flow.

## Keeping people and goods moving

The region has grown significantly but the capacity of the 50 year-old SR 520 corridor has remained unchanged. Today, SR 520 is one of the most congested corridors in the Puget Sound region, serving approximately 115,000 vehicles each day. Variable tolling, increased transit, improved real-time driver information, and more telecommuting options, will help reduce congestion. Recent analysis indicates that up to 20 percent of drivers will make different choices when tolls are introduced and new services are available in the corridor. They might take transit, carpool, shift the time of their trip, or change destinations.

## Vulnerable SR 520 bridges must be replaced

Built in the 1960s, the Evergreen Point Bridge and the Portage Bay Bridge are vulnerable to windstorms and earthquakes and are at risk of collapse if not replaced. If either of these bridges were to collapse, it could cause serious injury or loss of life and overwhelm all major regional highways with re-routed traffic.

## Funding

Governor Gregoire determined that the region needs a safer and more reliable SR 520 before 2018, asking WSDOT to find ways to build new bridge as quickly as possible. However, with many other competing needs in the region, the state has insufficient funding to replace the bridge or make other vital corridor improvements without relying on tolling for a portion of the revenue. Also, the longer it takes to start construction, the more inflation and price increases will affect costs. In 2008, State Legislature selected tolling as a way to fill the -\$4+ billion funding gap. The Urban Partnership's federal grant money provides the means to starting tolling earlier. Tolling earlier will improve cash flow, the cost of borrowing, and leverage an estimated \$370 million in additional bridge funding to save taxpayer money.

## 520 tolling survey findings

In 2008, State Legislature created the 520 Tolling Implementation Committee charging it with evaluating tolling for financing the 520 Bridge Replacement Project. The committee reported back to the Governor and State Legislature in January 2009.

As part of the evaluation, the committee conducted a phone survey between July and December 2008 reaching 16,000 people. Here are some of the results:

### Most supported tolling the 520 Bridge

Three-fifths or more of the respondents supported tolling the 520 Bridge as a means of paying for a portion of the bridge replacement.

### Electronic tolling increased support for tolling

When respondents learned that electronic tolling means vehicles travel at normal speeds through the toll area, a third or more were much more likely to support tolling the 520 Bridge.

### Support for early tolling when they considered its impact on toll amounts and financing costs

More than half supported tolling the existing 520 Bridge in 2010 when they knew that early tolling would result in lower tolls and financing costs.

### Support for early tolling when considering effects on travel speed

About half supported tolling the existing 520 Bridge in 2010 when they knew that early tolling would result in faster travel speeds on the bridge.

### Support for variable rate tolling

Respondents supported for variable rate tolling and the support increased when they knew that toll rates during off-peak times would be about half of peak toll rates.

October 7, 2009

**D R A F T**

Ms. Carol Moser, Chair  
Washington State Transportation Commission  
PO Box 47308  
Olympia, WA 98504-7308

Dear Ms. Moser:

Last month, WSDOT staff briefed the City of Kirkland Transportation Commission on the SR 520 tolling project. Our Commission subsequently raised two points for Council consideration. Please consider the following comments and recommendations as you deliberate implementation of tolling on SR 520.

The City Council recognizes and respects the Commission's authority to establish toll rates on State Highways. At the same time we recommend that the Commission give WSDOT the latitude to make changes to the toll rate within certain limits. This will allow quicker response to any unintended consequences of SR 520 tolling that may occur, for example traffic diversions to other facilities.

Current WSDOT recommendations call for toll exemptions for transit and transit agency owned vanpools. We support this recommendation and feel that consideration should also be given to toll exemptions for private carpools. Supporting carpools will be an important strategy to reduce the traffic impacts of the SR 520 reconstruction project. While WSDOT staff pointed out some of the safety and enforcement concerns with exempting carpools, we urge the Commission to consider creative ways to support strong carpool incentives.

Staff from Kirkland will be contacting WSDOT staff on several other project issues. These include items such as the development of performance standards to monitor possible impacts to local arterials and alternative routes, implementation of a strong TDM program, placement and content of signing, and the distribution of transponders for toll collection. The City of Kirkland was an early supporter of tolling and we continue to believe that tolling, supported by a strong transportation demand management program and complimented with additional transit service will be a positive change for the SR 520 corridor.

Sincerely,  
Kirkland City Council

By James L. Lauinger, Mayor