



A Firm Foundation for Growth

BRIEFLY

Adequate infrastructure - roads, water and sewer systems, schools - can assure that accommodating the influx of new population works to the benefit of communities in fast-growing regions of our state. Today, however, Washington faces significant backlogs in necessary infrastructure investment.

While road construction and maintenance represents the most immediate and critical demand, reliable research documents substantial need for local government infrastructure investment, as well

Importance of Infrastructure

Infrastructure – roads, water and sewer systems, jails, parks, and schools – form the foundation of a community’s plan for economic growth and prosperity. Investing in well planned, properly financed, public infrastructure helps accommodate and direct growth to the benefit of the whole community.

The growth experienced by Washington State over the last decade demonstrates this is a place that people want to live. Washington’s economy has grown by 50 percent, spurring population growth of 18 percent. According to state projections, more people are on the way. The state’s official forecasters anticipate that statewide population will grow by 280,000 people by 2005 to total 6.1 million people.¹

In a series of focus groups sponsored by the Washington Association of Realtors in July of 2000, citizens were asked to describe what actually attracts newcomers to our state. Said one: “(It’s) the variety of things that are offered here in this area. You have the lakes...the mountains...the city...the country...farms. Desert, rainforest...the coastline within a four or five-hour drive to Seattle. You have virtually every known type of terrain. It’s very unique in that way.”²

For many newcomers, of course, there is also the attraction of a well-paid job.

To accommodate significant population growth, well-planned and adequately maintained capital infrastructure is vital. Some “no-growth” advocates argue against expanding infrastructure capacity as a means of thwarting new development – the “if you don’t build it, they won’t come” technique, perhaps. But while withholding investment may temporarily slow the influx of people and inhibit economic activity, it also causes leap-frog development, sprawl, and poorly planned communities, compromising the integrity of existing systems, jeopardizing public safety, economic vitality, and, ultimately, our quality of life.

Infrastructure is like clean air and water. Everyone takes it for granted until there is an obvious problem.

Unfortunately, local and national studies tell us that problems with our infrastructure have become obvious. Assessments show roads, bridges, water systems, and waste disposal facilities as well as dams, schools, airports, and transit systems need billions of dollars of repairs, upgrades, and additions.

A “Report Card for America’s Infrastructure”, released last year by the American Society of Civil Engineers, gave the nation’s infrastructure low marks. The worst mark – an F – went to schools. Roads and hazardous waste received D minuses. Mass transit, with the highest mark, only received a C. To fix all these, the report estimated would cost more than \$1 trillion nationally. Superfund cleanup is estimated to cost another \$750 billion.³





Writing last year about the “*Report Card*,” Daniel Turner, president of the American Society of Civil Engineers said, “The nation’s public works are public assets. All Americans have a stake in their upkeep and operation, and share in the expense of construction and maintenance... While some needs are being funded already through Federal, state and local programs and user fees, the current poor condition of the infrastructure indicates that investment levels are clearly inadequate.”⁴

Turner summed up the national problem this way. “While many infrastructure problems stem from limited funding at all levels of government, several other factors are involved. As a society, the nation continues merely to patch up outdated and fragmented... systems instead of investing in innovative technologies... and encouraging new behaviors. It also focuses efforts on “end-of-the-pipe” solutions... instead of reducing [the problem] at the source.”

In Washington last year, the state Public Works Board issued a report called the “State of Washington Local Government Infrastructure Study.” Based on a survey of 487 local governments, the study identified funding needs for a limited set of local infrastructure projects for the six-year period 1998-2003.⁵ These totaled \$8.16 billion with an estimated funding shortfall of \$3.05 billion. Fifty percent of the money would go to roads and bridges, with the remaining 50 percent for domestic water, sewers and storm water systems.⁶

Transportation is undeniably the most critical of these needs. It’s been bad and getting worse for some time. Nearly three years ago, Roundtable leader and Microsoft chief operating officer Bob Herbold said, “We see almost unlimited potential for the future of computing technology, and we’ve searched the world for the best and brightest software programmers to help us realize that potential. However, something as mundane as traffic congestion is now a serious problem for our company. Today, gridlock adversely impacts our employees both in terms of getting to and from work and in trying to enjoy the great Northwest.”⁷

Roundtable chairman, Kerry Killinger and committee chair Bob Helsell, in a Seattle Times opinion editorial, added that congestion “harms our economy by stifling the flow of freight between businesses and to and from our ports... The ports of Seattle and Tacoma combine to form the second largest gateway for container cargo in the nation, behind Long Beach,” they wrote. “But our ports are losing market share because congestion is slowing access to them.”⁸

The Texas Transportation Institute confirmed their remarks citing congestion in the Seattle area to be among the worst in the nation.⁹

Traffic congestion has become a major factor in how people feel about growth in general. A Quality of Life Survey conducted in September 2000, by the Washington Association of Realtors found that the people’s resistance to growth had overwhelmingly to do with their concerns for traffic. “All other opinions and attitudes towards growth must filter through their [negative] feelings about traffic,” the survey concluded.¹⁰

Last month, the Governor’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation released its findings and recommendations on what it terms, “the state’s transportation crisis.” In it the commission calls for spending between \$8 and \$12 billion over the next six years. In promoting its recommendations, the Commission said, “If enacted, our recommendations will ensure a safe and



reliable statewide system, ease congestion, speed delivery of products to port, preserve the quality of our air, and give the public transportation choices. This means people will be able to spend more time living their lives, not sitting in traffic. Our businesses will be confident that they can grow and prosper instead of looking to relocate. Our children will inherit an environment that is not choked by smog. And, people will be able to choose from a number of safe and sound ways to get from one place to another.”¹¹

In the coming months there will be much debate over our infrastructure – transportation, to be sure, but also, water quality and supply, sewers, sewage treatment, school buildings, and energy supply. The debate at this juncture will not be on whether new and on-going investment is necessary. That question has been settled – the jobs are here; the qualities that have drawn people here will continue to attract; more people are on their way.

The debate now turns to how much it will cost; when it must be paid; how; and by whom. Most of these questions will be answered in Olympia and in local city halls.

In doing so, local and state lawmakers must establish priorities. If new sources of revenue are required – and it’s likely they are – they must assure the money is spent on critical projects, like water and sewer systems, roads, schools and parks, that help to accommodate growth and facilitate appropriate development. Recent elections have shown the public will support additional public investment when taxpayers believe the money will be spent prudently. Failure to provide the infrastructure necessary for a growing population increases the inevitable costs and jeopardizes the quality of life for existing residents.

¹ Provisional Forecast of the State Population by Age and Sex: 1990 - 2020 November 2000 Forecast, State of Washington, Office of Financial Management, 11/2000. <http://www.ofm.wa.gov/popagesex19702020/forecast00.pdf>

² Washington Needs to “Think Big” When Planning for Future Growth, Washington Association of Realtors, <http://www.warealtor.com/warealtor/focusgroups.htm>.

³ Report Card for America’s Infrastructure, American Society of Civil Engineers, 1999.

⁴ America’s Crumbling Infrastructure, USA Today (Magazine), Daniel S. Turner, May 1999.

⁵ The study limited the infrastructure needs considered to those local government issues involving roads, bridges, domestic water systems, sanitary sewers, and storm water systems. It further limited these capital projects to include only those contained in a “financially constrained” plan as defined under the Growth Management Act. As stated in the study, “Under GMA, local jurisdictions’ capital facilities plans are required to show that the financial capacity exists to meet planned improvements. Communities must prioritize their needs from a “full” list of projects by carefully balancing community needs, regulatory requirements, and available funding. The result of this balancing process is a financially constrained plan...”

⁶ Local Government Infrastructure Study, Final Report, State of Washington, Public Works Board, June 1999. http://www.crab.wa.gov/pwtf/Reports/Infrastructure_Ex_Summary.PDF

⁷ Transportation Woes Call for Bold Action, Kerry Killinger and Bob Helsell Op-ed, Seattle Times, February 18, 1998. <http://archives.seattletimes.nwsourc.com/web/index.html>

⁸ Ibid.

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⁹ 1999 Annual Mobility Report, Texas Transportation Institute, 1999. <http://mobility.tamu.edu/study/PDFs/chapter2.pdf>

¹⁰ *Smart Growth and other Land-Use Issues in Washington*, Public Opinion Strategies for the Washington Association of Realtors, September, 2000. <http://www.war.org>.

¹¹ Letter to Governor Locke from Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation, November 29, 2000. <http://www.brct.wa.gov/>

