



BRIEFLY

Initiative 745 will delay development of an effective transportation plan.

By handing the legislature an unworkable mandate, the initiative threatens existing transit spending without providing adequate new revenues for roads.

Part 3 of 3

I-745: Unworkable plan delays real transportation solutions

Initiative 745 promises to “solve the traffic problem without raising taxes.”

Don’t count on it.

The initiative would direct the legislature to spend 90 percent of transportation funds on roads. But the math just doesn’t work, and I-745 threatens to stall the progress that has been building since 1997.

Will I-745 advance or delay the development of a smart, adequately-financed plan to ease congestion and build roads? There are three reasons to believe the initiative will create delays:

FIRST, THE 90/10 SPLIT REQUIRED BY THE INITIATIVE CANNOT BE ACHIEVED BY REDISTRIBUTING EXISTING SPENDING.

Since transit taxes cannot be redirected to road building, the legislature would face three hard choices: raise taxes, transfer general fund dollars to roads, or cut transit.

Local transit districts and Sound Transit compose 85 percent of the non-roads spending under the most likely interpretation of the initiative’s definitions. That money cannot be shifted to roads purposes. And although substantial savings may be identified through performance audits, squeezing planning and administrative budgets, etc., those savings will increase the efficiency with which the money is spent, but not the number of dollars expended.

Even if the legislature adopts some of the “no new taxes” approaches to increasing funding for roads, like dedicating the transportation-related sales tax, total funding will not be increased enough to achieve the “90 percent for roads” requirement imposed by the initiative.

SECOND, THE 90 PERCENT TARGET IS ARBITRARY.

Even if it were possible to achieve the 90 percent target, there’s no indication that the formula is the best one for the state. Solving the state’s transportation problems will require a combination of approaches: roads, ferries, buses and rail. Different parts of the state have different requirements and priorities. People want choices.

Road building has been seriously neglected, and finding more funding for construction and maintenance should be the state’s top transportation priority for future expenditures. But the goal will not be accomplished by cutting locally approved transit taxes.

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THIRD, ATTEMPTING TO RECONCILE THE OBJECTIVES OF I-745 WITH EXISTING TRANSPORTATION AND BUDGET REALITIES MAY KEEP THE LEGISLATURE FROM CONCENTRATING ON ACHIEVABLE TRANSPORTATION SOLUTIONS.

The recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Transportation Commission will be released in December. While the commission's recommendations will not satisfy every – perhaps any – interest group, they should contain the elements around which a policy consensus can be formed. It's clear from the commission's published work that road building will be a priority.

I-745, on the other hand, would sidetrack legislative consideration of commission recommendations. Lawmakers traditionally have shown great reluctance to tamper with the will of the people as expressed through initiatives. Sorting through the often-unclear requirements of the initiative (e.g., defining qualified road spending) and considering how to override local control in order to enforce a statewide allocation formula would result in unacceptable delays in adopting realistic transportation policies.

Eroding confidence in representative government. There's another problem posed by I-745. In directing the legislature to do something that cannot be done, I-745 contributes to citizen distrust of the legislature. Had initiative drafters stated a simple intent – “make road building the state's top transportation priority,” for example – the legislature could comply easily.

But instead, they wrote a prescription that lawmakers cannot fill. Although transit advocates fear reductions of up to 50 percent statewide, that outcome is improbable. It's hard to see the legislature cutting voter-approved taxes and reducing transit services so drastically. Lawmakers would be justly reluctant to comply with the initiative by taking a course that adds nothing to road construction while reducing bus services on which many commuters and others rely.

But it is easy to see lawmakers wrestling with how to comply with a citizens' initiative that places them in an untenable situation. Conceivably, the legislature, after long and unsatisfactory debate, will end up ignoring the initiative's mandate. Of course, there are no guarantees. And either result will diminish the public's confidence in the legislative process.

While the initiative aims to solve the transportation problem, it tosses the legislature an impossible and unwise mandate. The most likely result of its passage will be another legislative session lost – another detour from a viable solution.



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