



February 8, 2022

Contact: Andrew Kidde
Transportation Co-Lead, [350 Washington](#)
Phone: 206-501-6905
Email: akandrew37@gmail.com

Contact: Charlie McAteer
Communications, [Front and Centered](#)
Phone: 917-696-1321
Email: charlie@frontandcentered.org

Subject: Washington Highway Megaprojects Violate State Targets, Increase Greenhouse Gas Emissions, and Worsen Air Quality

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: Fourteen planned highway megaprojects in the State of Washington, potentially funded by the transportation package expected today, would dramatically increase greenhouse gas emissions, worsen air quality and violate state targets. 350 Washington used a [highway pollution calculator](#) developed by [RMI](#) to calculate the emissions that will be generated by **these 14 projects which could add up to one billion vehicle miles traveled (VMTs) per year**. All those VMTs are projected to release up to 10 million metric tons of CO₂e and will add air pollution that causes asthma and other diseases in vulnerable communities, especially in South King County and Spokane.

“[RMI](#) developed the [SHIFT Calculator](#) to increase transparency around how highway expansion projects tend to increase vehicle miles traveled, emissions, and air pollution through the well documented phenomenon of induced demand,” said **Ben Holland, a manager on RMI’s Urban Transformation team**. “The next decade is critical for reducing carbon emissions. Maintaining the status quo of widening highways will only move us in the wrong direction and further hamper our potential to meet our climate goals.”

As the **Washington State House and Senate prepare to announce a possible 15-year, \$15 billion transportation package today**, advocates for transportation, disability, environmental, and health across the state are raising issues that legislators must consider. As the public awaits news regarding how much funding will be allocated to what types of projects, these advocates encourage everyone to notice the funding allocated to highway and road expansion. The data 350 Washington has found suggests **we will not meet our air quality, greenhouse gas, or public health and accessibility targets unless we reverse our highway expansion habit**.

According to **Paulo Nunes-Ueno of [Front and Centered](#)**, frontline communities in Washington State suffer first and worst from the environmental harms of pollution from freeways and expanding and building new highways will only make these environmental health disparities worse. “We need to stop asking BIPOC communities to bear the cost of our addiction to oil and autos,” said Nunes-Ueno. “If we keep going this way, widening highways and roads while neglecting transit and sidewalks, we will lock in emissions for decades to come and lock many people out of opportunities to thrive.”

“Every mile of highway expansion means more children dead in vehicle collisions and a higher number of cardiovascular and preterm births from air pollution,” warns **Dr. Annemarie Dooley of [Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility](#)**. “The exact opposite is true for every extra mile of bus, rolling, and strolling infrastructure. Biking alone is associated with 40% reduction in cardiac and cancer deaths. Where to put transportation funds should be an easy decision for legislators.”

In addition to these health impacts on vulnerable communities, our spending on highway expansion megaprojects delivers unjust access to mobility. As **Katie Wilson of the [Transit Rider’s Union](#)** notes, “It’s long past time for Washington state to prioritize public transit over building new highways. Our members ride transit because they are low-income, or disabled, or trying to do their part to reduce carbon emissions. Transit riders across the state are treated like second-class residents when lawmakers fail to invest in world-class, affordable public transit.”

“Every new lane of traffic means higher speeds, longer crossings, and more risk for people walking and rolling,” said **Anna Zivarts of [Disability Rights Washington](#)**. “Wider and higher speed roads are more difficult and far more dangerous for those of us without the privilege of driving to cross, meaning we become more reliant on asking people to drive us, and we become further isolated and segregated from community participation. We are fighting for communities where we all have equitable access, but every new lane of traffic widens the chasm we must bridge to reach an accessible future.”

Others note that adding lanes for single-occupancy vehicles takes us in the wrong direction for fighting climate, and at the same time will not cure congestion. “It is so essential right now to push back on the misconception that expanding highways is going to solve our congestion problems,” said **Grace Hope of [350 Washington](#)**. “The science behind this shows that it leads to more driving, more community pollution, and more greenhouse gas emissions. We need to be sure we’re investing in infrastructure that safely moves freight to communities and gets all people where they need to go without having to sacrifice a healthy environment or a stable climate for future generations.”

“Based on legislative interviews and WSDOT project lists we believe the impending transportation package will likely include several of these highway expansion projects,” said **Erin Dixon of [350 Tacoma](#)**. “Yet the legislature has not yet looked at the cumulative climate impacts of these megaprojects, even though transportation is already our biggest source of climate pollution. Nor did they look at the specific health implications for communities. Given the damages to climate and health, this data must be considered. Further, legislators should note that the total Vehicle Miles Traveled and Greenhouse Gas emissions from these projects will violate targets written into law by the legislature in 2007-8.” (RCW 70.235.020; RCW 47.01.440)

“The state legislature has focused on highway expansion for 60 years and where has it gotten us?” asks **Doug Trumm, executive director of [The Urbanist](#)**. “Every six or seven years when it’s time to pass another state transportation package they insist this time they will finally solve congestion by widening highways, but it never happens and the never-ending quest continues. The state’s decision to prioritize infrastructure for fast-moving cars instead of infrastructure for people walking, rolling, biking, and riding transit has meant steadily climbing pollution and traffic deaths instead of the mobility justice and vibrant, pollution-free communities we deserve. We have to start investing in the future instead of repeating the mistakes of the past.”

Spending money on highway expansion may also be irresponsible after neglecting our existing roads and bridges for so many years. Washington’s Transportation Secretary **[Roger Millar](#)** says “we need to be spending \$2 billion a year (on maintenance and preservation) and we’re spending \$925 million dollars a year.” A fix-it first approach is called for in a recent **[#TakesTransportation resolution](#)**, reports **Frances Merenda** of the **[36th District Democrats](#)**: “Making massive investments in highway expansion now will generate expenses down the road as we increase pollution and create a backlog of maintenance. Instead, we must care for the assets we have already built by prioritizing safety, maintenance, and preservation of current highways, local roads, and sidewalks over expensive and harmful expansion.” The State Democrat party has also endorsed a “fix-it-first, pro-mode-shift position” in a recent **[Sustainable Mobility resolution](#)**, according to **Arvia Morris** of the **[Environment and Climate Caucus of the Washington State Democrats](#)**.

One of the larger megaprojects, the North Spokane Corridor (US 395) will, all on its own, generate up to 220 million vehicle miles per year and up to 2.2 million metric tons of CO₂e. According to **Linda Carroll, [SpokeAT \(Spokane Active Transportation\)](#)**, the new freeway will also “sever a sequence of six east-west streets, cutting off most of the Minnehaha neighborhood in northeast Spokane that I grew up in. The sour cherry on the sundae is that, in order to receive funds earmarked for active transportation, planners are looking to add a bike lane that will probably run alongside the motor vehicle lanes, with cars spewing exhaust and particulate pollution in the faces of whatever brave cyclists manage to use it.”

Given health and climate costs, 350 Washington demands that lawmakers hit the brakes on highway expansion. “A good first step in this package would be to eliminate expansion for single-occupancy vehicle lanes,” said **Ingrid Elliott of [350 Seattle](#)**. “If we need to address idling trucks heading to and from the Port of Tacoma on Highway 167, then the added lanes should be freight-only. If commuters are stuck in traffic, then let’s build them exclusive Bus Rapid Transit lanes, as lawmakers have requested for the I-405. But if we add more unrestricted lanes to address these problems, [the principle of induced-demand](#) tells us they will just fill up with cars, and the trucks and commuters will be stuck in traffic all over again. We will have wasted billions, not solved our congestion problems, and simply paid a lot to create more air pollution and climate change.”