

Palouse Region Transportation Issues

Rural Washington Needs

The Palouse Region has important transportation issues that are unlike those found in more urbanized areas. The quality of life in this rural region should be maintained. Transportation deficiencies and future visions need to be planned for and improved in the present before they require expensive fixes. Bypass routes will reduce through traffic in the communities to protect pedestrians such as children walking to school. Small investments such as left hand turn lanes and realigned intersections will reduce backups and improve safety on the Region's highways. These improvements are needed for economic vitality and will attract more jobs and businesses. These smaller scale investments will result in large returns!

Questions for Secretary MacDonald:

- Best ways MPOs/RTPOs can get their needs met?
- How can rural counties compete with urban areas for funding?
- How can rural eastern Washington have their voice heard?
- How will the WTP funding look: programmatic? project specific?

Members and Contacts

Ken Olson, Palouse RTPO Director

Steve Watson, Lewis Clark Valley MPO Director

Don Scheibe, Asotin County Commissioner

Dwight Robanske, Columbia County Commissioner

Dean Burton, Garfield County Commissioner

Jerry Finch, Whitman County Commissioner

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The Palouse Region

RTPO and MPO Areas

The Palouse Region includes a Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) and a Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO). The Palouse RTPO consists of the jurisdictions and transportation agencies within Asotin, Columbia, Garfield, and Whitman counties. Whitman County joined the Palouse RTPO in 2003. The Lewis Clark Valley MPO is a newly formed bi-state MPO and includes the jurisdictions and transportation agencies within the Lewiston and Clarkston metropolitan area.

Region's Key Issues

The Palouse Region has its own unique characteristics that affect the movement of freight and people. Important issues in this region include improving economic vitality and providing access to medical services, recreational areas, and social activities.

The region has enjoyed a fairly balanced multi-modal system that consists of rail, barge, truck, transit, and para-transit. However, several factors affect the ability of the multi-modal system to serve the economic and social needs of the region. The economic viability of the Snake River as a transportation system is being challenged, and railroads are continuing with rail line abandonments. Both of these systems are critical in moving freight through the region. The road infrastructure is not adequate in many areas to support the increased axle weights of trucks and year-round trucking. In addition, the geometrics of some roadways do not provide adequate widths for trucks to safely operate.



Washington Transportation Plan: Key Statewide Transportation Issues in the Palouse Region

System Preservation

System preservation is vital to this region. A well maintained roadway system is needed to connect Palouse region communities with each other and the rest of the state. Preservation of highways is also key to freight transportation from farms to highways and other freight hauling modes. Without well maintained roadways, access to rail and barge transportation modes would not exist.

System Efficiencies

Optimizing the smaller region's current transportation system so that it operates efficiently is important in the Palouse region, especially in the more congested urbanized areas (Clarkston and Pullman).

Safety

Many safety deficiencies in the Palouse RTPO region are due to the area's challenging topography of rolling hills and river valleys. Highways were often built without cuts and fills to straighten alignments, resulting in poor sight distance. Travel lanes and shoulders are also frequently too narrow and in disrepair. Several intersections in the region have adverse approach angles making it difficult for trucks to turn onto main highways safely. Guardrail is needed to protect the traveling public in areas adjacent to steep slopes. The increasing number of recreational travelers in the region who are unfamiliar with the roadway are an added concern.

Transportation Access

This region has a low level of basic public transportation services for its residents. There is a segment of the region's population that cannot access indispensable social and medical services without the provision of public transportation.

Funding and Regionalism

Limited funding has become a growing problem, especially in light of recent regulatory changes. One such regulation is the State Stormwater Management Guidance. This regulation requires higher emphasis on how counties manage stormwater associated with transportation systems, which increases the costs of maintenance and construction programs.

Health and the Environment

This region continues to emphasize promoting healthy communities and a well-protected environment through its transportation programs. Examples include building bicycle and pedestrian pathways, providing public transportation amenities, and promoting livable communities.

Bottlenecks and Chokepoints

Although this rural area cannot compete with highly urbanized areas for congestion related funding, congestion is still a growing problem. It affects the livability of the rural towns and cities that have the major highways in their region as their "Main Street". There are several opportunities for low cost investments in this region that can have significant returns. Left-turn lanes are planned to reduce traffic backups caused by vehicles stopping in the through lane to make left-hand turns. Vehicles at deficient intersections often enter into the traffic stream without adequate spacing and cause through traffic to slow down. A bus pullout is planned for Clarkston to improve traffic flow on US 12. Narrow bridges need to be replaced to improve congested areas where traffic currently slows down to avoid collisions with pedestrians, bicyclists, and stalled vehicles.

Contributing to a Strong Economy and Good Jobs

Economic vitality is a key issue in this region. The region's economy has not kept up with the rest of Washington State. Elected officials and public agency staff are making major efforts to promote economic activity and increase the number of jobs available.

Moving Freight

Road closures that occur to protect the infrastructure during freeze and thaw conditions are a major impediment to moving freight between January and April. These road closures affect agricultural and local industries. One of the major goals for this region is to secure funding to reconstruct regionally significant freight routes for "all weather" travel for loaded trucks.

Building Future Visions

The Palouse region has developed a vision of its transportation system for the future. Some of the major transportation improvements identified include bypass routes in the Pullman and Colfax area, improving access to major arterials such as Fleshman Way and SR 129, increasing the capacity of US 12 by widening it to four-lanes in Clarkston, and maintaining short-line railroads and the Snake River Barge service.

Fleshman Way Interchange

The Fleshman Way/SR 129 Interchange project has been on Asotin County's 6-year TIP for a number of years and continues to be unfunded. This regionally significant project is a key connector between states, provides freight access and also provides direct access to the Nez Perce County Regional Airport. The interchange experiences about 25,000 vehicles per day. Some of the major turning movements on the interchange are cross-turning and currently operate below LOS D, and there are a significant number of yearly accidents because of this. The project would involve complete reconfiguration of the interchange.

The original evaluation performed in 1995 needs to be updated to develop a current project funding package that outlines the problems, identifies project alternatives, provides cost estimates and has buy-in from key funding sources.

This new study will include the following:

- Updated traffic count data
- New accident analyses
- A review and update of the original design alternatives
- New proposed design alternatives
- A review of environmental alternatives and impacts
- A review of right-of-way impacts, update the cost estimates of alternatives
- Coordinate with WSDOT to obtain public and stakeholder input as necessary on alternatives
- Achieve buy-in of alternatives

Work on this study could start within the next couple of months and is estimated at approximately \$30,000. The study is funded through a partnership between the Palouse RTPO, Lewis Clark Valley MPO, and WSDOT South Central Region.

