

SR 539, Guide Meridian – I-5 to Horton Road: Mobility Improvements

Comments received July 14 through October 6

We posted our Guide Meridian interim report on Thursday, July 14. The purpose of the report is to explain how the options work and share the results of our evaluation. We hoped community members will use this information to ask questions and share their perspectives to inform WSDOT's selection of projects for construction:

- Do you have questions about our technical analysis and how the improvement options are expected to improve traffic flow and safety?
- Did we miss any benefits or disadvantages?
- What else should we consider as we weigh the benefits and disadvantages?

Many individuals have read the report or summary, and have provided feedback. Their comments are shown on the following pages, along with some of our responses.

We have begun to internally review the proposed SR 539 – Guide Meridian project and the impact it will have on Bellis Fair. As I understand the process, we will make our preliminary comments now then WSDOT will release their project findings for public review the week of July 11th. Then, we can make additional comments until the review period ends in September.

We understand the traffic congestion problems outlined in your initial project improvement findings, and our hope is that we can work closely with the state, city, and with our own Traffic Engineer (who we expect to retain in the very near future) to determine the best alternatives that will have minimal impact upon the productivity of all businesses located at Bellis Fair, including the department stores and restaurants.

The Telegraph/Meridian intersection is a main thoroughfare for the shopping center. Closing the left turn lane to the main entrance to the property would be an inconvenience to our customer and a detriment to our businesses; we are concerned that this in turn will negatively impact sales at the mall. These lost sales will of course also create a loss of sales tax revenue.

Here is a brief outline of our initial concerns based on our knowledge of the property, and General Growth's experience with retail properties across the country. We expect that additional and more detailed observations and issues will be raised by our Traffic Engineer.

- This will impact the ease of access for our customers – convenience of entry to the property as it was originally designed will become an issue.
- For local residents arriving from south Meridian - they will now have to stay on Meridian for a longer period of time, which we anticipate to create a negative perception for these shoppers.
- This will negatively impact the Bellis Fair access for southbound traffic exiting onto Meridian from I-5, especially our Canadian customer that may not be as familiar with the area and other options for entering the mall.
- This will have an impact for truck deliveries to the property.
- The Bellis Fair Mall Parkway entrance that will now receive Meridian traffic is not as easily navigated as the Telegraph entrance. It has an S turn and brings shoppers to the back door of the property. It will be more of a challenge to navigate this road especially during snow/ice events. If you look at a site plan of the property you can see this road does not provide easy access to the businesses on the south and/or west side of the property.
- McDonald's, Boston's and Red Robin will experience a significant impact as their access will be minimized.
- Implementation of this plan may in turn require costly and disruptive changes to traffic circulation within the mall property.

Thank you for working through these issues with us, and we look forward to a good partnership.

WSDOT response:

Thank you for your email. You have understood the process accurately – it is helpful for us to have your detailed comments before we release the report so we can incorporate your feedback, but it is certainly not the last opportunity to comment. I appreciate your willingness to work with us to address traffic problems on the Guide, and I look forward to talking with you more as we proceed through this summer.

Hello.

I have just learned about the proposed changes to the i-5 and Meridian area by Bellis Fair mall.

To start off, here is the public online comment I made to the Bellingham Herald story covering it ;

I HATE it so far, and I am an expert on this piece of road.

I own Cafe Caffe, which is in the mall with Ross and Shari's and Coldstone Creamery. The traffic is a mess, but it is imperative that it is not made any worse. I frequently arrive from North of town on the southbound i-5 exit by the golf club, south of the i-5, then I need to work my way rightbound, changing lanes to the right, one after the other, hopefully in time to turn at Burger King, or Shari's, or at my business. I never know where the break in traffic will occur, so i absolutely need all those options. It appears that they want to bottleneck all that traffic into one ultra-congested driveway. That's like having one fire exit.

If they prevent lane changes for the incoming traffic exiting from the Northbound traffic that came from downtown, then options and flexibility will be limited. Often, there will be no traffic at all in the rightmost offramp lane, so I can currently spot that break in traffic and go to the right early. This new plan would prevent me from getting where I need to go, possibly missing later chances as well, and have to go all the way to Bakerview, right past my destination. Then I'm driving around town making more exhaust emissions, rather than getting to work.

Your report included many admissions that these plans will cause alternate, new, relocated problems and stress and blockups. I agree heartily with those admissions :

1. - "...The disadvantage is that drivers wanting to make those left turns will have to do so elsewhere, so it may mean a slightly longer trip and more left turns at the next intersection"

I agree. More than you know. When I don't have options to see where a break may occur, I need to drive unreasonably far and long.

2. - "...It may generate backups and traffic circulation challenges in private parking lots..."

I agree. It is only due to the multiple ports that the parking lot traffic is even slightly manageable.

3. - "...it's possible the change would increase weaving movements and backups elsewhere, simply shifting the problem to a different location."

I agree. It will ruin my ability to come and go in a reasonable fashion.

4. - "...Remove center turn lane..."

Each day, when I leave my business, it is ONLY because of the center turn lane, that I am able to get into traffic without impeding the flow of other traffic. That turn lane is the safe haven by which I can get past the Northbound Meridian flow (once a break finally occurs), and then I can negotiate in the center turn lane until a proper break occurs in my destination Southbound Meridian lanes.

WSDOT response:

Thank you for sharing your concerns. As you're well aware, the problems on the Guide are complicated, and hopefully we can work together towards improvements that will improve traffic flow and safety. We will be contacting businesses and property owners in the next two months to discuss the improvement options in more detail, and I look forward to talking with you as we move ahead.

The suggested changes seem reasonable at this time.

The one sticker is preventing no right turn for cars traveling north on Meridian who want to turn right on Telegraph to Deemer, up Deemer to Kellogg, left on Kellogg, right on Meridian to Horton and left to home. I can make the Deemer run in 4 min. Deemer needs to go all the way thru to alleviate traffic. I use this route both ways when Meridian is clogged.

I have a few comments about the Guide Meridian. I drive the Guide daily at about 4:30am and sometimes, but really trying to avoid it, around 2:00pm. I work in Lynden and it's a straight shot from my home, I almost always take the freeway home because it is a mess and hassle to deal with the Guide.

1. Make it impossible for left hand turns onto the freeway on ramp that goes Southbound I-5, from Southbound Guide Meridian. There is a sign there now, but I still get stuck behind people waiting to do that.

2. The majority of the people I see on that part of the Guide are using their cell phones and texting as well. Make it a higher fine area to discourage that.

3. This didn't come from me and you can't use my name, but one or two days out of the year the Bellingham Fire Department uses that area for "Fill the Boot." Yes it's a donation but it's a safety hazard.

They used to tell me when they were doing it because I complained so much. Talk about back up because you've got people in the roadway asking for donations. It backed you up further than it does now. The first time it happened I called the police, the dispatcher couldn't believe it, but higher up in the department it was o.k.'d.

4. Get all the lights to work together. The ones between Telegraph and the Southbound side of the freeway do what they want.

5. Make the semi's use the right hand lanes. The Canadians usually don't.

6. What I've also noticed is that people tend not to block the

intersections if the section of the Guide before you is backed up to the light. So here I'm waiting for the traffic to move up so I can go forward and you've got people stuck behind lights on the side streets taking free right hand turns keeping the Guide not moving. Makes me want to block the intersection.

7. Something for the bicycles. Worse thing is having a bicycle in front of you and you can't pass. More so on the Southbound Guide because there isn't a sidewalk between Bellis Fair Pkwy and Telegraph(?) i.e... across from Ross (?).

Geeze, guess that was more than a few comments. But thank-you for taking the time to read this. Good luck with your improvements.

WSDOT response:

Thank you for sharing your feedback – we appreciate your thoughtful and constructive comments.

There's just one piece of info I wanted to share in response to item #7, "something for the bicycles". We're limited by the eligibility requirements of the federal border highway program that is providing funds for this project. It specifically states that the funding is to be used for "the safe movement of motor vehicles to and across land borders." In addition, the Guide is not a bike route - the city of Bellingham Bicycle Route Map identifies several parallel routes (including Northwest Avenue, Deemer Street, James Street and Hannegan Road) as preferred routes for bicycles through this part of the city.

Another concern....

When you are driving south on the Guide and as you go under the Interstate there is a no left turn sign to get onto Southbound I5, can the curb be extended? Travelers get confused [especially those that have campers] and still try to make a turn. I can't tell you how many near rear-enders that have almost occurred because of individuals making the turn anyway. Just thought I'd throw it out there during the planning stages for this area.

I understand that northbound would have to continue north one light to go into Bellis Mall and I totally understand that the northbound exit from I-5 and northbound guide who are trying to take a right onto Telegraph is a dangerous mess. But how is a northbound guide driver who is not exiting the freeway to get onto eastbound Telegraph? If vehicles will have to go up to Bakerview to take a right, take a 2nd right onto Demer, and another right onto Telegraph, I suspect you will have lots of pissed off seniors driving north from the Cornwall Park area who just want to get to Denny's for their morning coffee. You have probably thought about some kind of fix (maybe two right hand lanes at Telegraph and Meridian...which would then increase weaving on Telgraph?) but I thought I'd point out this problem.

DOT Folks,

The Bellingham Herald reported proposed changes in traffic flow on Meridian Street north of I-5. A few comments:

Good Ideas:

Extending the right hand turn lane, northbound, Telegraph to Bakerview. This has long been a silly bottleneck.

Widening the turn lane at the end of the I-5 off-ramp onto Meridian. Much better for truckers, and will speed traffic flow northbound, as well as lessen ramp backups.

Bad ideas:

Removal of the center turn lane. Will seriously hurt businesses on the east side of Meridian.

Removal of left turn lane onto Telegraph from Meridian, for access to Bellis Fair Mall.

1. This will increase traffic on Birchwood to Sunset. This is a slow moving traffic area as people search for medical treatment offices near the hospital.

2. It will increase traffic greatly both directions on Illinois-Sunset. This will hamper emergency vehicles going to the hospital.

3. It will cause backups on the Sunset I-5 bridge as northbound turn lanes fill up. This happens now without all the additional traffic.

4. It will cause people on the west side of the city to take highly indirect routes to the mall, wasting non-renewable gasoline.

The worst moment in my day is exiting to go northbound on the Guide Meridian. I have to find a way to merge and then get over one more lane so that I don't immediately have to turn right. I'm not surprised there are accidents there. Naturally the traffic up Meridian from downtown wants to take advantage of their green light so I have to be aware of that light too, even though it doesn't control the intersection where I'm merging. It's nerve wracking. Thank you for trying to fix it.

I just read in the Herald that the state is looking to improve our Meridian mess. Thank you! I try to avoid that area of town as much as possible. If I must head North, I'll drive a little out of my way to get to my destination to have peace of mind when I arrive.

I have some thoughts for dot about the mess. It seems when coming off I-5 going North, the 'free' lane gets crowded as cars merge right trying to turn onto Telegraph. Perhaps that ramp lane should have a traffic signal stopping cars with a red light where they could still have a free right turn when appropriate. The signal when green allows cars coming off the ramp to have total freedom to enter any lane they wish heading North without worrying about on coming traffic. Obviously, the signal may cause back-up onto I-5, but keep in mind those vehicles will be in their designated lane on I-5. There are at times with current situation that cars are backed up on I-5 so this may not be so different in regards to the back up but may ease the flow on Meridian. I would also suggest to eliminate curb cuts. This may not be too popular with some businesses, but in the long term it will help their customers and create

less road frustration. As a business owner convenience is what is most important for the customers. Taking a little longer route and knowing once on arrival and departure that the ease of entering and leaving is stress free, that is considered convenience and leaves a better attitude with the shopper. I would eliminate the curb cut on the East side of Meridian between Shari's and Ross. On Meridian put a curb down the center to eliminate anyone turning into that strip mall. Force all cars to make the left turn at the signal on Telegraph. Those leaving this mall heading North would need to use the entrance/exit on Telegraph. With the new center curb the left turn lane could be extended to handle all the cars in conjunction with the timing of the signal. On Telegraph itself (this may be a city project) I would again eliminate the curb cut between Key Bank and Rite Aid. Force all traffic from that strip mall to use the Telegraph entrance that is between Dollar Store and Rite Aid. This is the road that lines up with the Mexican restaurant. I would also put a center curb down Telegraph in front of the curb cut between Burger King and Denny's. that curb cut would then allow RIGHT TURN ONLY. Those cars leaving this strip mall would be forced to exit at the curb cut behind the Mexican restaurant then turn left to the Telegraph intersection. Currently there is a STOP Sign, but monitoring this intersection after the changes to both strip malls may indicate a traffic signal be installed.

I like the idea of extending the far right lane on Meridian when coming off the I-5 ramp. Also, working on better timing of all traffic signals starting with those South of the overpass and continuing with the one for Bellis Fair / Value Village.

This area of traffic is truly unruly and will only get worst. I commend you and your department for addressing this issue today. Good luck with this challenging undertaking.

WSDOT response:

Thank you for sharing your comments and your support for extending the far right lane, installing curb and consolidating driveways. We agree that it will help customers and reduce frustration. The city will be glad to hear that you support installation of curb on Telegraph Road – they are considering moving forward with just such a project.

Your idea to install an additional signal to manage traffic coming off northbound I-5 is an interesting one, and something that several folks have suggested. Our main concern is the backups onto I-5. As you say, that change would exacerbate that problem. Reducing those backups is one of the top priorities for our project because those situations create a potential for high-speed rear-end collisions that often result in serious injury. As much as we want to address congestion on the Guide, we've got to address those backups.

Thanks again for taking the time to write to us.

I read over your proposed improvements and agree with all of them. Although I don't live in the area, I drive to Lynden weekly and avoid the Guide especially in the subject area. Controlling access is a smart way to go with the traffic volumes you are dealing with. I use either the Hannegan Road or the Axton I/C to cross over to the Guide to get to Lynden. Good luck!

I am forced to drive through Guide Meridian to Horton area regularly. I would hate to see access to Telegraph Road closed off. When traffic is heavy, I do find an alternative route. One problem I have seen many times is the northbound traffic waiting to make a left turn onto northbound freeway onramp. The lane is too short and traffic blocks the adjoining lane. This pretty much stops northbound traffic. Perhaps an adjustment to the traffic lights would help. I am happy to hear about the extension of the right lane to the Bakerview. This will make it much easier for me to escape the area and travel home via the Hannegan Road instead of the Guide. Thank you

No response needed.

Having been a resident using the Guide Meridian for over 40 years, I have seen the changes to this particular section.

I totally agree with the proposed changes. (My #1 priority would be installing a curb between I-5 and Telegraph. #2 priority would be eliminating the left turn to Telegraph. My #3 priority would be to extend the northbound lane to Bakerview.)

Another concern is Telegraph, 1/2 block east of Meridian. (I know this is a city street) A curb needs to be installed to block traffic from crossing, making left turns, and generally doing dumb things.

Something needs to be done. In fact, changes should have been attempted years ago. I agree with all you propose and wish you luck and a speedy completion.

I just want to make a comment about the re-engineering of the Meridian Street off ramp from I-5

First please realize that I use the Meridian off ramp a lot, it is the access to my home just off of Meridian St at E Victor St which is 1 mile south of the I-5 over pass

Also realize that I am a builder educated in Planning . I frequently need to turn right off of Meridian St onto Telegraph Rd to get materials at Home Depot and Telegraph Rd is a short cut to go to Lowes and Builders Alliance on Hannegan avoiding driving up to Bakerview Rd .

I agree that traffic merging from the freeway on to Meridian is dangerous especially when north bound traffic wanting to right turn on to telegraph Rd is so vitally trying to merge into the right turn lane for Telegraph Rd. It has in my opinion become a skill and demand to execute that turn - especially if you are driving a van or truck with out side windows or limited mirror views.

My opinion if it matters is this.

There needs to be more signage for "merging" off the ramp for north bound vehicles. Perhaps we could add another dedicated signal light at the end of the

northbound freeway ramp to safely cycle vehicles to go onto meridian, and have the other northbound Meridian traffic held alternately at their own light, now existing on the south side of the freeway. That way, when we are driving up Meridian from our home near Cornwall park, and wish to turn right on Telegraph Rd, the light will hold the freeway traffic until we are allowed to proceed safely.

The light allowing vehicles on the ramp to go left onto meridian is unusually timed.. I know because I was stuck there for few hours when my fuel pump quit and I had to flag cars to go around me until help arrived and although notified the police did not come help control traffic at all.

Anyway,,

We also think that the existing I-5 off ramp could have ramp tributaries offering exits directly on to telegraph at or near Deemer Rd which connects Telegraph Rd to E Baker View which is controlled by a stop light at E Baker View.

Also

I know ,, North Bound Trucks on Meridian turning left onto the freeway ramp are a problem,,Why don't you try to direct trucks with lights or signage to use McLeod Rd to go to Northwest Ave and use the north bound ramp from Northwest Ave,,, or eliminate turning on to the north bound ramp from Meridian entirely - pertaining to all vehicles, making north bound access from West Bakerview Rd or Northwest Ave only.

WSDOT response:

Thank you for your comments. I know lots of folks in the community share your concerns about constructing curb between I-5 and Telegraph to restrict right turns, and I appreciate you sharing how it would affect you.

Your idea to install an additional signal to manage traffic coming off northbound I-5 is an interesting one, and something that several folks have suggested. Our main concern is that change would exacerbate backups onto I-5. Reducing those backups is one of the top priorities for our project because those situations create a potential for high-speed rear-end collisions that often result in serious injury. As much as we want to address congestion on the Guide, we've got to address those backups. Your ideas to construct a ramp tributary is also a good idea for the longer term; unfortunately, it would exceed our budget for this project.

Thanks again for taking the time to write to us.

Ms. Woehler,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the interim report on the *SR 539, Guide Meridian -- I-5 to Horton Road - Mobility Improvement Project*. I live in the Lettered Streets Neighborhood and work at Whatcom Community College. My shortest route to work is along this stretch of SR 539, but I avoid it almost entirely because of the traffic. I'd like to bike along this most-direct route, but there is no cycling infrastructure for me and I don't feel it's safe as-is.

As you may know, Futurewise - Whatcom and Sustainable Connections held a public information session July 13 on the "Complete Streets" concept. The SR 539 project is a perfect opportunity to begin to put that concept into action here in Bellingham. SR 539 is one of our worst traffic messes, worst driving experiences, and absolutely one of the worst places for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit riders to be.

I am particularly pleased to see note in the Interim Report of the Legislature's goals (p. 9) addressing Safety and Mobility. They fall right in line with Complete Streets concept.

When moving forward with your project to improve safety and mobility through this corridor, please remember that the purpose of public right-of-way is not to move vehicles. Rather, the purpose of public right-of-way is to move people and goods, as the Legislature has stated. People and goods can use multiple methods of transportation, as long as the built environment lets them do so safely. Currently SR 539 south of Horton Rd. is built to serve motor vehicles almost exclusively. Let's fix that problem -- and by doing so, people and goods will flow better through the corridor.

Errors in the Interim Report

Errors of Fact

1. In the *Existing transportation features* section on p. 4: while there are "sidewalks and crossings at signalized intersections" in the corridor, it is incorrect to say they "are available throughout the corridor" because there are sections of road without sidewalks, and portions of some signalized intersections do not have marked crosswalks.

- no sidewalk on the west side of SR 539 between I-5 and Bellis Fair Parkway.
- no marked crosswalk on the south and west portions of the SR 539/Bellis Fair Parkway intersection.
- no marked crosswalk on the south and west portions of the SR 539/Telegraph Road intersection.
- no marked crosswalk on either portion SR 539/I-5 North on-ramp

2. In the *Existing transportation features* section on p. 4 and in *Options not to be considered...* on p. 23: "There are no bus stops on this part of the corridor." According to the WTA system map http://www.ridewta.com/files/file/wta10_system_map.pdf (and confirmed with Google Maps/Streetview) there are bus stops on both sides of SR 539 near the intersection with Stewart Rd.

Errors of Interpretation

A. In the *Existing transportation features* section on p. 4:

It is true there are "no bike lanes on the corridor." However, between Kellogg Rd. and Horton Rd. there is a marked shoulder that is wide enough for cyclists to use.

The reason why the Bellingham Bicycle Route Map doesn't identify Meridian/SR 539 as a preferred bike route is that it lacks dedicated cycling facilities. As soon as the route is fixed to provide bicycling facilities, it should be added as a preferred bike route. Cyclists and pedestrians do already use the corridor, partly because the alternatives are either too out-of-the-way (Northwest Ave. & Hannegan) or are no safer (James Street). Lack of listing as a bike route today does not mean SR 539 should not be improved for cyclists. In fact, it's the number one reason why it should be.

B. Regarding bus stops in the *Existing transportation features* section on p. 4 and in *Options not to be considered...* on p. 23:

There would be more than two bus stops in this corridor if there were bus pull-outs and a little less congestion. The 3, 4, 25X and 71X all go past the shopping center to the east between Telegraph Rd. and Bellis Fair Parkway, but none stop. The 15 and the 331 only serve the mall. Folks trying to get to businesses on the east side of SR 539 have a really difficult time of it. Let's help fix that.

Misleading Exhibits

The images on pp. 30 & 31 that are placed to illustrate the idea that trucks need a wider turning radius at the I-5 north off-ramp both show trucks that have successfully navigated the existing corner. The drivers are merging left immediately, even though they don't have to, probably to avoid the phantom right-turn-only at Telegraph. I'm not the only one who remembers when it actually was a right-turn only at Telegraph....

Comments on the Options

- "Realign Telegraph Road Intersection": see Additional Ideas below.
- "Eliminate northbound left turns onto Telegraph Road": see Additional Ideas below (but generally fine by me).
- "Remove center-turn lanes and add curb to restrict left turns": By all means get rid of it and restrict left turns. But instead of filling the center-turn lane with a median, eliminate the center-turn lane and use the recovered space for bike lanes on both sides of the road. Use a jersey barrier to divide north and south traffic. Where left-turn pockets are required, expand the right-of-way to maintain the bike lanes.
- I'm confused as to why "Eliminate southbound left turns at Telegraph Road" is not considered, but "Install curb between I-5 and Telegraph" is. It's very odd to consider eliminating a right-hand turn, but very normal to restrict left-hand turns. One of the reasons the weave between I-5 and Telegraph is so bad is that people still remember when it was a right-turn only lane. The existing signage does not do a good enough job of convincing drivers exiting I-5 that they don't have to immediately merge left. So fix the signage. Also, see Additional Ideas below.
- "Extend northbound lane between Bellis Fair Parkway and Bakerview Road--Business Access Lane": It may help with the weave off I-5, but I'd rather see you try fixing the problem with signage first. If there's going to be any widening of the roadway, it has to also add bike lanes.
- "Widen turning radius at northbound off-ramp": I've not seen trucks have difficulty with this turn since the radius was last widened. Both images provided as evidence of a problem

show trucks that successfully made the turn, but whose driver choose to merge immediately. Fixing the signage would help the drivers know they don't have to merge immediately.

- "Consolidate business access/driveways": Yes, please.
- "Setting speed limits": It should be 35 mph or less south of Stewart Road, and soon south of Horton.

Issues Not Addressed

- On northbound SR 539 at I-5, the left-turn pocket for turning onto the I-5 northbound on-ramp is too short, leading to vehicles backed up into the travel lane.
- Incomplete sidewalk network and unmarked crosswalks create challenges for pedestrians.
- Missing bike lanes create severe challenges for bicyclists.
- Few transit stops in the vicinity.
- The combination of the missing pedestrian, bicycling, and transit infrastructure make it difficult for non-drivers to access the businesses in the corridor. Anyone without a driver's license -- be they young, old, disabled, or have a suspended license; anyone without access to a motor vehicle; anyone who would choose not to drive were it possible; all these groups are largely cut off from access to the businesses and services in this corridor.

Additional Ideas

I know from driving this stretch of road (albeit as little as possible) that the Telegraph Road intersection is terrible, in every direction.

With the recent success of the roundabouts further north on SR 539, and the new one at Northwest Ave. and I-5, how about a roundabout at SR 539 and Telegraph Road? You'd have to close a couple movements at the I-5 interchange:

- end left-turns from SR 539 northbound onto I-5 northbound
- end left-turns from I-5 northbound offramp to southbound SR 539

Access to both I-5 northbound from SR 539 and to SR 539 southbound from I-5 would be available by going around the roundabout. It seems reasonable to expect that backups on the I-5 off-ramp would be mitigated since traffic should flow better, rather than moving in the fits and starts that the traffic signals currently force.

It would alleviate some of the weave at the I-5 North off-ramp since northbound vehicles would see that they don't have to get left before the Telegraph Road intersection. And it would allow for left turns from southbound SR 539 onto Telegraph.

And if trucks can handle the roundabouts on SR 539 further north, why not in town, too?

Final Comments

To improve mobility for all users through the corridor, add bike lanes; complete the sidewalk and crosswalk system; and work with WTA to add appropriate bus pull-outs. When you remove the

center turn lane, that should free up enough space in the right-of-way to allow for bike lanes on both sides of the road (or at least extra wide sidewalks like on Sunset Drive from I-5 to Orleans).

I understand that the federal funding for this project are tied to 'vehicles,' not goods and people. My bottom line is that nothing done for this project should interfere with future efforts to improve this corridor in keeping with the Complete Streets ethos of transportation infrastructure that works for all modes of use. Visit www.completestreets.org for more information.

If the top priority here really is "reducing backups on the northbound off-ramp from I-5 (p. 37)", then why is "Realign Telegraph Road intersection" off the table? It's the traffic signal at Telegraph that backs up the off-ramp, along with the merging/weaving. I think a roundabout at Telegraph should be seriously considered as a potential solution.

The interim report is a nice PR piece for the idea of Access Management, and that is fine. Just don't make things worse for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users in the process. I have no interest in seeing traffic speeds increase by "15 to 20 miles per hour (p. 37)," for example, unless you're talking about increasing them from the 5 mph that we sometimes see during times of congestion. The history of the road was interesting to review. I did learn one new thing from the report -- despite living here on and off since 1992, I did not know that Bellis Fair Parkway went through to Deemer. So, thank you!

WSDOT response:

Thank you again for your detailed and thoughtful comments. I appreciate your support for implementation of access management, such as installing curb to restrict left turns and consolidating driveways. Thanks also for directing our attention to a few details we got wrong in the report about the placement of sidewalks, crosswalks and bus stops. We'll make corrections in future versions of the report.

We are very familiar with "Complete Streets" and I'm aware of the public information session. In fact, I attended the "Developing a Complete Streets Policy" workshop hosted by Whatcom Council of Governments on July 14. We have implemented aspects of Complete Streets on many highways.

You're absolutely right that it's all about the right way to move people and goods. There definitely is a place for a discussion about how to improve multi-modal transportation in this part of town, unfortunately the scope of this particular project is limited by the purpose of our funding source -- "the safe movement of motor vehicles to and across land border crossings."

A few specific responses to your letter:

***"The reason why the Bellingham Bicycle Route Map doesn't identify Meridian/SR 539 as a preferred bike route is . . .":** This is not an error of interpretation. The reason it is not identified on the map is that we don't believe it's a good idea to encourage bicycling on this section of the Guide. The Guide is a Strategic Truck Route and border highway of statewide significance that also serves a major retail center. Traffic volumes are very high. There are parallel routes that provide better facilities for bicycling.*

***Turning radius:** The photos on pages 30 and 31 are not misleading exhibits. While many trucks can make the turn without a problem, many others do legitimately have difficulty - we did an analysis and determined that the turning radius is not consistent with our latest standards for large trucks.*

Bike lanes and bus pull-outs: Removal of the center-turn lane does not necessarily provide enough space for bike lanes and/or bus pull-outs and we can't simply "expand the right-of-way" to make room – that would involve acquiring property from businesses along the Guide. Even if that were something the community would support, it would take far more time and expense than what we've got for this project.

Roundabout: I absolutely agree with you that roundabouts can be very effective in some locations. We didn't take time to consider it for this project simply because design and construction would far exceed the funding we have available. I suspect that this option will be considered if/when there is a future project with more funding.

Signs: We will review the existing signs and identify the need for changes as part of our detailed design. Signs support and complement roadway improvements but they are not a substitute. We've found drivers tend to become complacent about signs, so the best way to affect their behavior is through design of the roadway itself.

Travel speed: You correctly point out that it's not necessary to increase free flow travel speeds on the Guide. My reference to increases of 15 – 20mph is only for congested corridors where traffic is moving much slower than the posted speed limit, like the Guide during peak periods.

Northbound Meridian – left-turn to northbound I-5: You're right that the left-turn pocket is short. Unfortunately, it would be too expensive to fix because there isn't enough space under I-5 for widening.

I encourage you to connect with local and regional multi-modal transportation groups, if you haven't already:

City of Bellingham's Transportation Commission:

<http://www.cob.org/government/public/boards-commissions/transportation/index.aspx>

Whatcom Council of Governments' Community Transportation Advisory Group:

<http://www.wcoq.org/Planning/CTAG/28.aspx>.

You raise good points, and I really appreciate you taking the time to review the report in detail and provide such thorough feedback. Please contact me at 360.757.5981 or woehlek@wsdot.wa.gov if you have questions or wish to discuss further.

Installing a curb between I-5 and Telegraph Road could cause more problems. People traveling south on I-5 will have a difficult time getting to Telegraph road exiting at the Guide. They will have to go to the Ross exit on the Guide and take a chance of getting hit by a female Oriental Canadian in a huge SUV peering out over the top of the dash board going to the Ross store.

Perhaps you could have a sign on the freeway showing that you can't change lanes exiting I-5 north until you get past telegraph road. I need to get to Home Depot safely. Everything else looks good.

Good morning,

Reading your list of improvements for Meridian and some thoughts.

1 I have great concerns about the idea to remove the center lane for making left turns, I use them often every day, they work fine and do not hinder normal traffic. Eliminating these lanes would require all vehicles to wait at traffic signals, increasing the numbers of left turns at intersections and you would probably see a significant back up as lights are not long enough. This would cause additional travels as vehicles attempt to access various businesses. Adding curbs to restrict turns will be restricting more traffic flow. How does one get to Les Schaub Tires if there is no way to turn left?

You do not see MVA's from left turning vehicles from center lanes. Almost all MVA occur at controlled intersections, often from making those left turns.

Also with the high traffic volume, the center lanes are almost the only options for emergency vehicles.

2 Extending the northbound number 1 lane all the way to Bakerview would be a big help, what to do with the businesses along the way?

3 What is needed is a dedicated right hand turn lane SB at Bakerview. The existing lane is about 100 feet of which only 30% can handle a vehicle. Extending this lane from the previous intersection would help.

4 Installing real and practical entrances to businesses would greatly improve traffic. Ever watch vehicles SB making right turns into the bookstore near the corner of Meridian and Bakerview? Almost cant be done without the rear wheel jumping the curb. Dont engineers know the rear wheels do not follow the front wheels? This right turn requires vehicles to take up the whole width of the ramp, something they cannot do when another vehicle is trying to exit. A vehicle trying to make this R hand turn virtually stops all SB traffic in number 1 lane at this location. I see these ramps installed all along the new portion of Guide Meridian North of Horton. Makes me wonder if desk engineers ever really drive cars???

5 Probably the most significant and most needed improvement (and most expensive) is a third lane SB from Bakerview to I-5. The number 1 lane is exceedingly slow due to the fact that there are three options for that lane, straight ahead, move slightly right for the SB on ramp to I-5 and right turn into Bellis Fair Mall. This somehow makes traffic much slower. Number 2 lane SB easily handles double the traffic at this location.

6 Concerning the NB I-5 off ramp, that has been a mess for 20+ years, the recent "improvements" have somewhat reduced but not eliminated the problem of people stopping and waiting to merge into number 2 lane, not realizing they already have a lane. I understand the need to accommodate wide loads but you also need to better educate drivers at this location. Install TWO lane indicator signs right in the small island at eye level to autos making it clear what they have. This should not interfere with any attempts to merge because there is no immediate need. Also consider extending the lane separator another 20-30 feet, this would help tremendously.

My general advice and comments are simple, stop making more restrictions to traffic and wasting more money. Simply adding a third lane NB and SB would be the best investment of all. More expensive but the best option for long term, the numbers of vehicles is increasing and always will. The decisions 30 years ago to save money by not installing three lanes both N and S and not installing frontage roads as an alternative is now going to cost us all a lot more money.

An example of restricting traffic is the traffic lights at Smith Road. NB Left turns are ONLY allowed when the green arrow is activated, the rest of time we are waiting. There is often little or no traffic SB after the

initial discharge of SB vehicles, yet NB left turners are just sitting there, seemingly forever. This 50mph intersection is no different than other similar intersections except the left turn restriction. Please modify this.

The best way to analyze traffic is to simply drive it. I greatly understand the flow patterns in this area, and have my own solutions for how to best manage my way through. I know which lanes are slow or "faster" and the exact locations and why it happens.

Enough in my first letter, thank you for listening.

This intersection is the most dangerous in the county.

Just last week I was coming off I5 to the guide, I looked very carefully to see any problem, and saw none so I proceeded. I was just about 1/2 way on the lane (northbound) only to have a speeding car (from the south up the guide) just about clean me out.

This is the second time, I nearly was taken out. I'm speaking about a driver who hasn't had an accident in a number of years.

My idea is we should have a light just N on the guide, after I-5 traffic join.

Maybe just moving the guide light N a few yards. So to guard traffic Nbound on the guide.

We are located on Meridian St. just south of Kellogg Rd. I have a few questions/concerns with the upcoming project.

First, it seems from reading the report that a center turn curb is one of your focus points. This happened in front of my Bellevue location to great detriment. All of my northbound customers would lose easy access to my location!

Second, you cover consolidating driveways.

This seems a viable alternative for this area. My location already shares access with seven to eight other businesses. This access is on the south side of my location. I would hope this would be a strong option going forward for turning left from Meridian. I assume WSDOT would help with flow suggestions around the various parking areas.

Finally, I do agree that traffic on Meridian needs something. But, stopping left turn-ins from the south would be a great detriment. The whole of Bellingham comes to my location from the south.

Please feel free to contact me to discuss what I believe would be a workable solution for all the businesses in my area, a shared left turn access at the south end of my building.

WSDOT response:

Thank you for your email, I'm glad to hear from you. I appreciate your concern about the project - I'd be concerned, too, and I know from speaking with many business owners that they feel the same way. You're correct that we're very seriously considering a center curb, but at this stage the idea is to provide left-in turns at designated locations. Your suggestion that we develop some sort of shared driveway with left-in access for you and your neighbor businesses is very promising and I look forward to discussing it with you.

We will be making arrangements in the next few weeks to meet with business owners to discuss possible configurations for curb and left-in turns, so you'll hear from us soon. In the meantime, please don't hesitate to contact me if you have additional questions or wish to discuss the project.

I hope that most of the article in the Bellingham paper is accurate. I strongly believe that the issue is getting the traffic to move more efficiently. The current situation is that it is impossible to get through two traffic signals during business hours. Since moving to Whatcom County in the fall of 1999 I am very surprised to observe such a high percentage of drivers demonstrating unsafe operation of their vehicles. This includes operators with license plates of Washington and British Columbia. Unfortunately, any changes will not correct these operators. I like having the fifth lane to make left hand turns to businesses and they should remain otherwise the commercial business will be negatively impacted. I agree that the telephone intersection is a challenge, especially when vehicle operators do unsafe lane changes at the expense of others. These drivers also do not have YIELD in their mental being. I would like to see the traffic lights adjusted to allow more movement north and south. I believe this is a very do-able change as currently the cross traffic seems to be the priority. Honestly, I try to avoid the Guide between I-5 and Kellog street during business hours due to the congestive situation which could be greatly improved. Improved driving skills would be very beneficial! I sure hope that the funds are spent to make changes and not study the problem until the funds disappear which seems to be the norm in this state. Good luck.

WSDOT response:

Thanks for your feedback and ideas. You can be sure that you'll see changes happen – we've secured funding for construction in 2013.

Thank you for addressing this problem! I avoid that area whenever it is possible which limits my business in the area. I also attempt to circumvent the traffic whenever possible, however, there are few options.

I want to express my alarm and concerns about the potential curb extending from the I5 north offramp all the way to Telegraph Road. I have found that the curbs located elsewhere in the city are extremely dangerous and support your warnings about weaving traffic and congestion elsewhere.

Since I have lived in several larger cities prior to my relocation to Bellingham, adding the right hand curb lane would, in my experience, improve traffic flow immensely.

A second possibility would be to widen Bakerview Road (between Hannegan Road and Meridian) to provide alternate routes which may accommodate traffic.

Close the entrance by key bank on telegraph rd.

I5 north bound on ramp @ Guide: Add a new lane that enters from the Bellis fair mall. This lane would be a Right turn only from the mall in front of McDonalds. This would be isolated from Guide Traffic and would merge into one lane in the on ramp.

south bound Guide @ telegraph: add a third lane (north of intersection) that can turn into the mall and pass through intersection to the already existing third lane for I-5 on ramps.

-
1. Paint New Lines and put in road turtles. It really needed from horten st north. this is needed be for winter.
 2. Put in "Keep Right Except to Pass" and "Slower Traffic Keep Right" signs. from horten st. north. This is really needed.
 3. Guide Meridian, I-5 south on ramp. need to be fixed. one lane at a 90 deg turn getting on I-5. Is crazy with all that traffic. The on ramp / Mcleoad road is in very ruff shape.
 4. The off ramp from I-5 to Guide Meridian. gets very backed up. this needs to be fixed.

The two main areas that make traffic bad in this area are the on and off ramps.

You wrote an article that you wanted comments from the public in Bellingham about the intersection of I-5 and Meridian St.

Why don't you install a light similar to the one you have at I-5 and Old Fairhaven Pkwy, where, when several cars are in the on ramp the light changes to allow the cars in the on ramp to exit safely to Old Fairhaven Pkwy? As it is now, the cars in the on ramp trying to get on to the Meridian Have to squeeze in between the traffic on Meridian.

WSDOT response:

Thank you for your interesting suggestion. We've heard similar comments from several other folks. You're definitely on to something – we agree that helping traffic flow freely from the off-ramp would help quite a bit. That's why we're looking at extending the northbound right lane, and also why we've raised the possibility of installing curb between I-5 and Telegraph. Unfortunately, adding another light isn't feasible. With so much activity occurring in the small area between I-5 and Telegraph, we wouldn't be able to synch a new signal with the existing one at Telegraph to keep traffic moving efficiently.

Thanks for taking the time to write to us – we appreciate your feedback.

As a driver for WTA, when we leave Macy's and come down the ramp on E Bellis Fair Pkwy, there is a considerable waiting period for the southbound light to change on Meridian. Why not make the right lane (turning south onto Meridian) a "right turn only" lane, so that people can take free rights out of there? The left lane could be for both the straight-ahead and the left turn folks.

It seems to me that it would improve the flow of traffic coming out of the mall onto Meridian. Or possibly make the lights sequence a little faster? There is also a major problem with the light at Meridian & McCleod taking forever to turn green for the east-bound people on McCleod turning left onto Meridian.

Thanks for listening! I know it won't be an easy fix so I do wish you luck in coming up with a solid, user-friendly plan!

WSDOT response:

Thanks for writing to us. We took your earlier comments to heart – as you may have seen, we are considering restricting the northbound left-turn at Telegraph, consolidating driveways and possibly installing curb between I-5 and Telegraph.

Your idea for Bellis Fair Parkway is an interesting suggestion. You're not the only one who has identified the potential for improvement at that location. We're pretty limited on what we can do on this particular project – the funding is specifically for improving traffic on the highway, not the side streets. It's a good thing to keep in mind for future projects, though.

I read the report on mobility improvements along the Guide Meridian, and I think there are a lot of good ideas listed. However, I would like to present a couple of other options that I think will improve traffic flow and will cut down on accidents. I hope it's not too late to suggest other ideas in addition to those on the report.

1. Block left turns from northbound I-5 exit 256A onto southbound Meridian Street. Drivers heading north on I-5 could instead use exit 256B (direct ramp to Bellis Fair), turn right onto Bellis Fair Parkway/Telegraph Road (whatever that stretch of road is called) and turn right again onto southbound Meridian Street. That way, you could eliminate left turns at the intersection with exit 256A and thus extend the length of time that drivers would have a green light heading north or south on Meridian Street. It seems to me that this could be a very easy and cheap option, just by changing some of the signs.

2. If you wanted to go a step further, you will recall that exit 256A on northbound I-5 currently splits into two lanes as you approach the intersection with Meridian Street: the left lane is currently for those drivers who want to turn left onto southbound Meridian Street or to go straight back onto northbound I-5. The right lane is for those who want to turn right onto northbound Meridian Street. If Option 1 above was implemented, then you could take those two lanes at Exit 256A, adjust the striping a little bit, and turn them into TWO right turn-only lanes, thus increasing the capacity of vehicles that could turn right onto northbound Meridian Street. If this option is implemented however, then it seems likely that you would have to then eliminate the "free right turn under all circumstances" that currently exists at Exit 256A for right-turners on to northbound Meridian Street; drivers at Exit 256A would have to wait at a traffic light instead. Honestly, I think that free right turn is doing more harm than good right now anyway, as this is leading to a lot of the cross-merging problems experienced between Exit 256A and Telegraph Road. Maybe you should make the drivers turning right at Exit 256A wait at a traffic light until it is their turn to go; and with a second right-turn-only lanes at exit 256A as opposed to only one lane right now, I don't think there would be a problem with traffic backing up along Exit 256A onto the main lanes of I-5. There should be enough capacity under this option, I think.

3. I think you should block right turns from northbound Meridian Street onto Telegraph Road. For drivers on northbound I-5 that want to get to Telegraph Road, they could take exit 256B to Bellis Fair Parkway and then meet up with Telegraph Road there. This option is similar to Option 1 above and could easily

be implemented by changing the signs. Again, a very inexpensive option, I would think.

4. If I am driving northbound on Meridian Street but I am currently south of I-5 and I want to prepare to merge into the far right Business Access lane coming up ahead, I can't merge right until AFTER I have crossed the intersection with Exit 256A. It would be easier and cause fewer accidents if I could merge into and already be in the far right lane BEFORE I cross the intersection with Exit 256A instead. There appears to be a grassy/empty section between the Exit 256B overpass over Meridian Street and Exit 256A. Maybe you could install a short pocket in that grassy section so that the far right lane on northbound Meridian Street actually begins before Exit 256A instead of after the exit. Of course, this would assume that you would have installed a traffic light (mentioned in Option 2) forcing right-turners at Exit 256A onto northbound Meridian Street to stop (or at least not be allowed to make a free right turn automatically). I think this could help to reduce a lot of the accidents at that intersection.

I am not an engineer, so maybe I am not realizing some of the consequences to my ideas above, but I have lived in Bellingham all my life (29 years) and I am pretty aware of the typical problem areas along the Guide Meridian. I would be interested to know your thoughts on these ideas. If they won't work, I would like to know where I'm going wrong.

Thank you very much for your time and for encouraging citizen feedback. Good luck in developing your final decisions on this project.

WSDOT response:

Thank you for writing to us about the project - you've obviously given this a lot of thought! I reviewed your suggestions with our traffic engineer; here's what we came up with:

- We, too, have considered restricting right turns from northbound Meridian Street to Telegraph Road. The advantage is that it helps address conflicting turns between vehicles; the disadvantage is that lots of folks make that turn to reach businesses and homes. There's also a possibility that blocking the turn would shift the conflict to a new location rather than solve it. As we mentioned in our report, this is an idea that we might consider eventually, but we think some other improvements would provide similar benefit with fewer disadvantages.

- A few of your suggestions hinge on eliminating the ability to turn left to southbound Meridian from the I-5 northbound off-ramp. It's an interesting idea; the challenge is that it would push even more traffic into the intersection of Guide and Telegraph, which is the most congested in the corridor. Ultimately our engineers are trying to achieve a subtle balance of traffic volumes between the signal at Guide/I-5 and Guide/Telegraph. . . changing the mix of cars in any direction could make it worse.

- We aren't considering any changes that might have the effect of increasing backups on the off-ramp because that's one of the problems we most need to address. Widening and adding a lane between the two northbound off-ramps would shorten the off-ramps and force vehicles to stop at the end, likely exacerbating backups rather than minimizing them.

Thanks again for sharing your thoughts about the project - we appreciate the feedback. Please let us know if you have any other concerns as we proceed.

Kerri - I've had a chance to review your Interim Report Evaluation of Options, July 13, 2011 regarding the proposed improvements to SR 539 from I-5 northbound.

Please be advised that I am in agreement with all your proposed options as shown. However, my only real concern is the proposed curb to be installed from the I-5 offramp northbound to Telegraph in the right lane, thus prohibiting right hand turns for northbound traffic along Meridian eastbound on Telegraph. My main concern is the same as stated in the Report, it would only shift problems elsewhere. But I do support this proposal with reservations.

Although I do favor preventing the merge/weave that most vehicles try at the end of the northbound offramp, I am concerned that this restriction would severely impact most businesses eastbound from SR 539 along Telegraph for traffic traveling north, from south of I-5 overpass along Meridian. Now, do I have any proposed solutions to this proposed alteration? No. I am really without a solution to this problem, other than a total redesign of the interchange (i.e., purchase businesses; Denny's, Key Bank, some of the strip mall businesses to widen/clear the area and re-construct existing roadways). I'm sure that a proper re-design and construction would well surpass the estimated \$10 million dollar mark.

Thank you for allowing me to comment on your Report. Any assistance I could extend to you would be sincerely appreciated as the project moves forward.

WSDOT response:

Thank you for reviewing the report and providing your feedback. We'll continue to send you our project updates as we proceed, and you're always free to contact us if you have questions or comments. Thanks for your offer of assistance – we'll definitely keep that in mind as we move forward.

Hi,

Just wanted to add my opinion as to what should be done here on Meridian Street. The timing of the lights should be changed all the way from downtown to the outskirts of Bellingham on Meridian. The lights stay too long in one direction backing up traffic for miles. All left turns should go at the same time from opposite directions instead of the 4-way lights that are now in operation.

There should be a stop sign at the bottom of the off-ramp from I-5 onto Meridian. There aren't too many places that you can exit without stopping at the next street. Don't want to see a curb eliminating right turns onto Telegraph Road from Meridian. If traffic from I-5 had to stop at the bottom of the exit, it would give motorists more time get in the lanes they need.

I can't see putting in curbs so you can't drive into the business you need to get to. The only place that gets backed up on Meridian is at the gas station just north of Bakerview when too many people try to get into the station at the same time. They can go a little further north and still make a right turn and get to the gas station.

If the timing of the lights was changed it would eliminate a lot of these problems.

Thanks for listening.

WSDOT response:

Thank you for sharing your thoughts with us. Here's some information I hope you'll find helpful:

Signal timing: *The city has adjusted signal timing to move traffic as efficiently as possible and will make additional adjustments if needed to complement future construction. Signal timing doesn't address the key problem in the corridor, however. The problem on the Guide is that the combination of high traffic*

volumes and lots of turns is concentrated in a short section of highway. Essentially, there's just too much activity squeezed into too small a space. This results in long traffic delays and more than 700 collisions in the last five years. These conditions make it difficult to travel through the corridor, get in and out of businesses, and could pose a barrier to future economic development.

Center turn lane: Removing the center turn lane and adding curb to manage left turns is one of our key strategies to address the problem of too much activity in a small space. This type of improvement, called access management, improves safety by separating access points so that turning and crossing movements occur at fewer locations. Managing access can result in better traffic flow, fewer collisions, and a better shopping experience. Studies consistently show that well-managed arterials are often 40 to 50 percent safer than poorly-managed routes. More information about these types of projects is available at: <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/projects/sr539/i5tohorton/>.

Northbound off-ramp: We aren't considering installing a stop sign at the northbound off-ramp because it would exacerbate backups onto I-5. Reducing those backups is one of the top priorities for our project because those situations create a potential for high-speed rear-end collisions.

Thanks again for writing to us. Please let me know if you have any additional questions or concerns.

I would like to take this opportunity to contribute my two cents toward the revisions being made to Meridian Street. I've worked on E. Bakerview Road for more than two years, and most of the time I drive to and from work. Sometimes I ride my bike. I would ride my bike more, and thereby reduce traffic if I felt it were safer. I know the road wasn't laid down with cyclists in mind, but anything that could be done to make the route less dangerous would encourage more bicyclists and reduce the number of vehicles. I'm sure you're well aware of the many benefits this would provide; a simple bike lane would reduce congestion and pollution in addition to promoting healthier lifestyles and a stronger sense of community.

WSDOT response:

Thank you for sharing your perspective as a bicycle rider. We agree that providing safe facilities for bicycles is an important part of relieving traffic congestion and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The improvements we are considering, which include restricting left turns and consolidating access points, will improve safety for all travel modes.

Unfortunately we were not able to consider adding bike lanes as part of this project. Removal of the center-turn lane does not provide enough space for bike lanes, and we cannot widen the whole corridor – that would involve acquiring property from businesses along the Guide. Even if that were something the community would support, it would take far more time and expense than what we've got for this project.

Furthermore, we don't believe it's a good idea to encourage bicycling on this section of the Guide. The Guide is a Strategic Truck Route and border highway of statewide significance that also serves a major retail center. Traffic volumes are very high. There are parallel routes that provide better facilities for bicycling. There is a place for a discussion about how to improve multi-modal transportation in this part of town; unfortunately the scope of this particular project on the Guide is limited by the purpose of our funding source – "the safe movement of motor vehicles to and across land border crossings."

I encourage you to connect with local and regional multi-modal transportation groups, if you haven't already:

City of Bellingham's Transportation Commission:

<http://www.cob.org/government/public/boards-commissions/transportation/index.aspx>

Whatcom Council of Governments' Community Transportation Advisory Group:

<http://www.wcog.org/Planning/CTAG/28.aspx>.

Thank you again for your thoughtful feedback. Please contact me at 360.757.5981 or woehlek@wsdot.wa.gov if you have questions or wish to discuss further.

MEMORANDUM

Date:	September 15, 2011	TG:	11141.00
To:	Janet Henderson		
From:	Shane Binder		
cc:	Kurt Gahnberg		
Subject:	Proposed changes to SR-539 Guide Meridian access to Bellis Fair Mall		

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT), in consultation with the City of Bellingham, has been studying options to improve traffic flow and the safety of operations along SR-539 (the Guide Meridian) from its interchange with Interstate 5 to Horton Road on the north side of Bellingham. Bellis Fair Mall, which lies adjacent to this segment of SR-539, has asked Transpo Group to evaluate the options proposed by WSDOT and recommend some alternative options which would be less restrictive to mall traffic access. Transpo Group has looked at the three intersections adjacent to the Mall; see **Figure 1** for a vicinity map and future year peak hour traffic volumes.

The Guide Meridian is highly congested at present, with an average daily volume of 50,000 in the vicinity of the Mall putting it among the busiest roads in the Bellingham area. As well, the segment of the Guide Meridian under study is a high accident location, with 700 collisions from 2006-2010. As a result of these factors, WSDOT has secured just under \$3 million for construction; this funding comes from a Federal program for border highways (as opposed to localized improvements) so north-south through traffic along the corridor is the primary target for improvements. The low value of funding available is also a constraint; long-term plans call for major reconstruction of the roadway but funding has not been secured for this project and is unlikely to arise in the near future.

Within these parameters, WSDOT has proposed a number of low-cost changes which impact the Mall environs:

1. Eliminate northbound left turns onto Telegraph Road
2. Extend a third (outside) northbound through lane from Telegraph Road to Bakerview Road
3. Widen the turning radius at the northbound Interstate 5 off-ramp
4. Install traffic curb between the northbound right and through lanes on Guide Meridian between I-5 and Telegraph Road

WSDOT hopes to achieve improvements in north-south through traffic flow and operational safety with these improvements. Specifically, they aim to:

- Reduce traffic delay at the Telegraph Road traffic signal (e.g. if a left turn is prohibited, more time within the traffic signal cycle can be given to the opposing through movement)
- Reduce or eliminate the weave between left / right-turning traffic and through traffic on Guide Meridian between I-5 and Telegraph Road.
- Minimize impacts to the retail businesses adjacent to this segment of Guide Meridian

It should be noted again that because the funding is for border highways, WSDOT acknowledges that there will be impacts to the adjacent businesses over the present conditions but seeks to lessen these impacts.

It is the first option proposed by WSDOT which would have the most detrimental impact to the Mall access, as Telegraph Road serves as the primary entrance to the Mall for traffic from the south. Access to the Mall can be gained by E. Bellis Fair Parkway but this route does not serve the front

of the Mall and is less suitable in the winter due to topology (a shaded hill that retains snow and ice in the winter). For purposes of this study, displaced traffic impacts to the direct access ramp from I-5 were not directly assessed as they do not impact Guide Meridian traffic.

Future traffic forecasts suggest that roughly 500 vehicles would access the Mall by turning left from northbound Guide Meridian at both Telegraph Road and E Bellis Fair Parkway in 2035 (using the existing roadway network). Of these vehicles, 60% would turn left at Telegraph Road and 40% at E. Bellis Fair Parkway. This left-turning volume is well beyond the threshold for a single left-turn lane at a typical signalized intersection and is best served by at least two left-turn lanes; the existing roadway network provides this capacity through a left turn lane at Telegraph Road and a left turn lane at E. Bellis Fair Parkway. After reviewing the options proposed by WSDOT for impacts to this traffic, Transpo evaluated two additional alternatives that aim to reduce delay and improve safety with less impact to Mall traffic:

- Installation of traffic curb between the northbound left and through lanes on Guide Meridian between I-5 and Telegraph Road
- Reconfiguration of the lane geometry on both approaches of Telegraph Road to eliminate “split phasing” traffic signal operations

As well, Transpo evaluated one final scenario at the E. Bellis Fair Parkway intersection which would provide the necessary left turn capacity if the left turn at Telegraph Road were to be eliminated. The first two alternatives are illustrated in **Figure 2**.

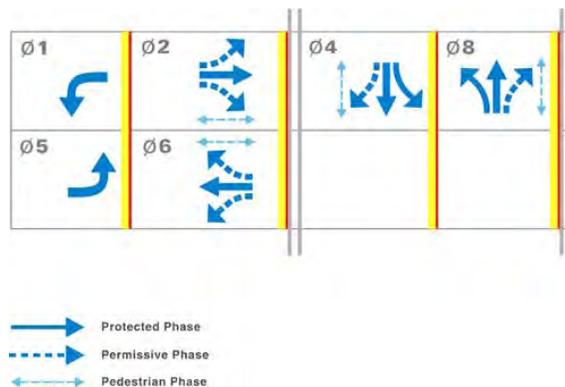
Option 1: Install Traffic Curb Between Left and Through Lanes

This option would install a 6-inch-high concrete curb separating the left turn lane from the through lanes on northbound Guide Meridian between the I-5 offramp and Telegraph Road. This curb would reduce some of the weaving that occurs between the offramp and Telegraph Road. Given the short distance between these intersections, this weave is a significant safety and operational hazard for vehicles from the off-ramp to weave through northbound Guide Meridian traffic to turn left onto Telegraph Road. Further, northbound I-5 traffic may directly access the mall via the direct access ramp. The left turn onto Telegraph Road is, however, critical for traffic coming from the south on the Guide Meridian.

Installing a traffic curb would prevent this hazardous weave from occurring and is a very low-cost improvement that is very unlikely to adversely impact traffic operations but could provide significant benefit. This benefit is difficult to quantify without a much more detailed microsimulation of the weaving segment, which would require more depth of study than the WSDOT model or data presently available.

Option 2: Eliminate “Split Phasing” on Telegraph Road

At a traditional signalized intersection, the opposing left turn movements run first (as shown by phases Ø1 and Ø5 in the figure at right), followed by the opposing through movements (as shown by phases Ø2 and Ø6). In a “split phasing” setup, the through and left turns from the same direction run together, and then the opposing through and left turns run (as shown by phases Ø4 and Ø8). The disadvantage of split phasing is that it is not as efficient at handling heavy traffic in both directions (as present on Telegraph Road).



By rechannelizing the eastbound and westbound approaches to the Telegraph Road/Guide Meridian intersection, the split phasing for the eastbound and westbound signal could be changed to a more traditional arrangement with left-turn phasing and additional green time provided for eastbound and westbound movements. The following channelization modifications are recommended for the eastbound and westbound approaches to SR-539 on Telegraph Road to eliminate the need for split signal phasing:

- Eastbound – 1 left-turn lane, 1 shared through/right-turn lane, and 1 exclusive right-turn lane
- Westbound – 2 left-turn lanes, 1 shared through/right-turn lane

Rechannelizing the eastbound and westbound approaches of Telegraph Road is a low-cost improvement that would reduce queues and delay to traffic on the side road, or could result in more green time given to through traffic on Guide Meridian.

Left Turn Capacity at E. Bellis Fair Parkway

As discussed earlier, if WSDOT prohibits left turns at the Telegraph Road traffic signal, then all northbound left turns into the Mall from the Guide Meridian would be routed through the single left-turn lane at E. Bellis Fair Parkway. The volume of 500 vehicles in the peak design hour would then utilize the northbound left-turn on the Bellis Fair Parkway. General industry guidelines would suggest that two left-turn lanes are necessary when left-turn volumes are in excess of 300 vehicles per hour. Based on this volume and the single northbound left-turn lane at E. Bellis Fair Parkway, the northbound left-turn queue would be in excess of 800 feet, which nearly extends all the way upstream to Telegraph Road. Without the additional left turn capacity, the current WSDOT proposal would result in further significant queuing on the SR-539 as a result of shifted traffic and over-capacity left turns. The net effect would result in not only significant impact to Mall access, but would not result in the fully intended benefit of reduced Guide Meridian queuing.

Following guidelines and installing a second left-turn lane would reduce the queue by half, to approximately half the distance back to Telegraph Road. This solution would prove very difficult to implement given the right-of-way and environmental constraints on both sides of Guide Meridian. It does illustrate, however, an unintended side effect of the prohibition of left turns at Telegraph Road and the level of reconstruction necessary to mitigate this impact.

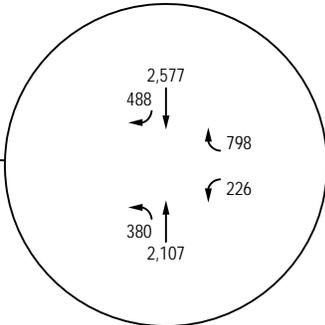
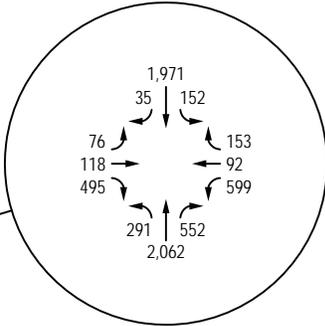
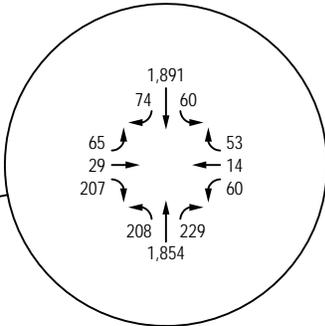
Conclusion

Most of the options that WSDOT is proposing for Guide Meridian will serve to improve traffic flow and/or the safety of operations without a major detrimental effect to businesses adjacent to the Guide Meridian. However, prohibiting northbound left turns at Telegraph Road would have the impact of shifting all Mall-bound traffic from Guide Meridian to the traffic signal at E. Bellis Fair Parkway. This intersection cannot accommodate the increase in traffic without substantial expensive improvements such as a second northbound left-turn lane.

Instead, simple changes to the geometry of the Telegraph Road approaches and installation of traffic curb separating the northbound left-turn from Guide Meridian will serve to improve traffic flow and operational safety along Guide Meridian for a very low implementation cost without substantial detrimental impacts to left turns from northbound Guide Meridian. Transpo recommends carrying these alternatives forward to WSDOT for their consideration in lieu of the left-turn prohibition.



NOT TO SCALE



2035 Peak Hour Traffic Volumes

Bellis Fair Mall Access Safety

M:\11\11141 Bellis Fair Mall Access Safety\6.0 Graphics\SR-539_graphic01 <A> shaneb 09/15/11 00:34



FIGURE

1



NOT TO SCALE



Proposed Options 1 and 2

FIGURE

2

Bellis Fair Mall Access Safety





**Washington State
Department of Transportation**
Paula J. Hammond, P.E.
Secretary of Transportation

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September 22, 2011

Janet Henderson
Senior General Manager
GPP – Bellis Fair
One Bellis Fair Parkway
Bellingham, WA 98226-5590

RE: SR 539, Guide Meridian Mobility Improvements Project

Ms. Henderson,

Thank you for your comments on our *SR 539, Guide Meridian Interim Report*, posted online in July. We appreciate that you took the time to review our work in detail and share your ideas with us. WSDOT and city of Bellingham staff discussed your comments and we've provided our feedback below.

Project background

As we've discussed, the high volume of traffic plus all the turns in and out of driveways and cross-roads on SR 539/Guide Meridian are a bad combination. The problem is that there's just too much activity squeezed into too small a space. The results are long traffic delays and more than 700 collisions over the past five years. These conditions make it difficult to travel through the corridor, get in and out of businesses, and could pose a barrier to future economic development. It's our job to use the funds we have available to address these problems and improve traffic flow and safety.

To decide which improvements to construct, we must weigh the public benefit provided by each option against the cost and disadvantages. Our assessment is based on a technical analysis that illustrates how each option would affect traffic delays and backups and the potential for collisions. We've also worked with community members to understand how the various options would affect travelers, property, businesses and the natural environment. This helps us weigh the pros and cons accurately and fairly.

Bellis Fair Mall comments

You outlined Bellis Fair Mall's concerns about restricting the northbound left-turn from SR 539 to Telegraph Road in a July 5 email:

- This will impact the ease of access for our customers – convenience of entry to the property as it was originally designed will become an issue.

- For local residents arriving from south Meridian - they will now have to stay on Meridian for a longer period of time, which we anticipate to create a negative perception for these shoppers.
- This will negatively impact the Bellis Fair access for southbound traffic exiting onto Meridian from I-5, especially our Canadian customer that may not be as familiar with the area and other options for entering the mall.
- This will have an impact for truck deliveries to the property.
- The Bellis Fair Mall Parkway entrance that will now receive Meridian traffic is not as easily navigated as the Telegraph entrance. It has an S turn and brings shoppers to the back door of the property. It will be more of a challenge to navigate this road especially during snow/ice events. If you look at a site plan of the property you can see this road does not provide easy access to the businesses on the south and/or west side of the property.
- McDonald's, Boston's and Red Robin will experience a significant impact as their access will be minimized.
- Implementation of this plan may in turn require costly and disruptive changes to traffic circulation within the mall property.

Transpo's traffic analysis is a welcome contribution to this ongoing discussion. We reviewed their September 15 memo and have the following detailed responses.

Left-turn capacity at East Bellis Fair Parkway

Our analysis indicates that the SR 539/E. Bellis Fair Parkway intersection would operate acceptably with the proposed improvements. We do not agree with the memo's assertion that the intersection ". . . cannot accommodate the increase in [northbound left-turn] traffic without substantial expensive improvements." With the extension of the northbound-through lane to Bakerview Road, the East Bellis Fair Parkway intersection has some excess capacity which will allow this queue management to take place. In addition, the City has agreed to manage northbound left-turn backups such that the length of queue does not become excessive.

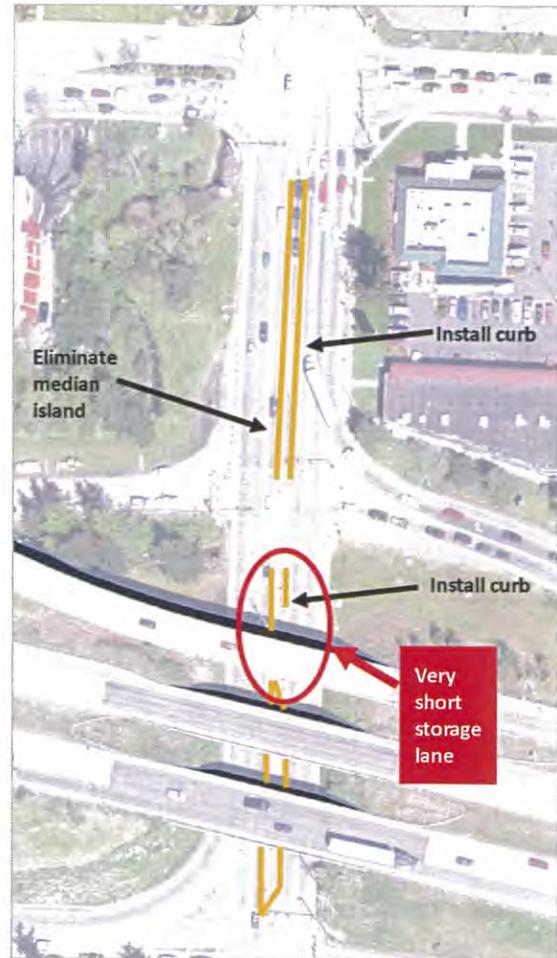
Install traffic curb between left and through lanes

We considered a variation of this option and decided not to proceed with it at this time because 1) it restricted vehicles headed northbound on Meridian Street from right turns to Telegraph, a movement for which the alternatives are poor; and 2) we determined that other options we were considering would help reduce merging conflicts.

Transpo recommends a different placement for the curb that would still allow right turns to Telegraph Road (see illustration). The placement of curb suggested by Transpo may help

reduce merging conflicts between the I-5/SR 539 interchange and the Telegraph Road intersection, but not any more than restricting the northbound left-turn at Telegraph Road altogether. There are several significant disadvantages to this suggested approach:

- This proposal would force northbound traffic headed to Bellis Fair Mall to use the left-turn lane at the I-5 NB ramps intersection. This left-turn lane is very short and cannot accommodate existing traffic for the northbound on-ramp, let alone the added left-turn traffic for the mall. The backups would spill into the northbound through-lanes, increasing delays at the I-5 southbound on-ramp/McLeod intersection. This is a fatal flaw.
- Requires that vehicles headed northbound on Meridian Street choose the correct lane before they reach the northbound ramps, which is one signal south of where they intend to turn. This would be an unusual configuration that may be confusing for drivers.
- Contributes to delay by reducing “green time” available for southbound traffic on SR 539.



Transpo's Option 1

Eliminate “split phasing” on Telegraph Road

We agree that this could be implemented at a low cost, but it is not clear that such a change would, as the memo contends, “. . . serve to improve traffic flow and operational safety along Guide Meridian.” We tested this option early in our own process, and we found it would have little positive impact for the problems that we are trying to improve. If anything, it could actually increase delay for northbound and southbound traffic on SR 539, which is contrary to the goal of our project.

The memo does not quantify the reduction in delay that would result from such a change. Our analysis indicates that eliminating the split phase has little impact on the operation of the signal. This is due to the predominant traffic flow from the side streets, which is heavily biased to the south. Because of this heavy southern flow, the signal would operate as de facto split phasing, even if the lane alignment did not require it.

Conclusion

Transpo's review does not change the conclusions we reached based on our analysis. Restricting northbound left-turns at Telegraph Road will significantly reduce backups and merging conflicts in the busiest part of the corridor. We anticipate the improvement would reduce delays for southbound traffic by 30 percent. These are needed improvements to traffic flow and safety that will benefit the 50,000+ vehicles that pass through the intersection each day.

We will work with you to minimize the negative effects the change will have on access for your customers and deliveries. For example, we will explore options for revising signs to guide traffic towards alternative entrances to the mall and make better use of the dedicated I-5 off-ramp that exits into the mall's main entrance. Other changes, such as the Eliza Connector project planned by city of Bellingham (in cooperation with Bellis Fair Mall), will improve access to the mall and traffic flow on Bellis Fair Parkway.

We will conclude the current "pre-design" phase of our project with release of a final report in early October. Detailed engineering will begin at that time and continue through 2013. We will stay in touch as we keep affected businesses informed of our progress. In the meantime, you are always welcome to contact me or Chris Damitio, Project Engineer, at chris.damitio@wsdot.wa.gov or 360.788.7403.

Thank you again for your detailed feedback and ongoing participation in the project.

Sincerely,



Kerri Woehler
Planning Manager
WSDOT/Mount Baker Area

Cc: Chris Damitio, WSDOT
Mike Koidal, WSDOT
Steve Haugen, City of Bellingham
Brent Baldwin, City of Bellingham
Chris Comeau, City of Bellingham