



**Washington State
Department of Transportation**

Central Puget Sound Area Transportation Focus Groups

Final Report

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Presented by

**Cocker
Fennessy**



Table of Contents

Summary of Focus Groups 1

Overall Themes 3

Overall Findings 4



Summary of Focus Groups

Cocker Fennessy Inc., a public affairs consulting firm based in Seattle, conducted 10 focus groups for the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) between September 18 and 25, 2003. Two groups were held each in Burien, Kirkland, Everett, Seattle and Tacoma. Each focus group was approximately two hours in length. There were five objectives:

- To explore current perceptions of WSDOT and its services;
- To gather information regarding the five-cent gas tax package and the public's awareness of and support for these projects;
- To gather input on behavioral strategies (i.e., better driving habits) that the public can support, and how WSDOT could promote them, to help address some of the more important traffic management issues;
- To gather information to help inform the Washington Transportation Plan; and
- To gather input on longer term transportation finance and investment choices, and to gauge public views on specific projects, their perceived benefits and optimal timing.

Participant Demographics

A total of 98 people participated in the groups—50 men and 48 women. The age range of participants was 25-65. All participants were registered voters and had voted at least once in the past four years. Eight percent of the participants were high school graduates, 48 percent had attended some college, and 44 percent were college graduates. Twenty percent of the participants rode transit or participated in a vanpool or carpool three or more times per week.

There was a geographic distribution roughly based on the urban and rural populations of King, Pierce and Snohomish counties respectively. The groups were segregated by gender to insure that participants would make candid remarks (often in discussions involving emotional topics, men and women respond differently in mixed-gender groups).



Selection Criteria

In order to hear unbiased opinions, Cocker Fennessy requested that participants meet the following criteria:

- Not employed by or related to anyone employed by WSDOT, a city or county transportation department, a transit agency, or a contractor or construction company that builds transportation projects;
- Not employed by or related to anyone employed by a newspaper, television station, radio station, advertising agency or market research firm; and
- Had not participated in a market research study, focus group or in-depth interview during the past year.

Moderators and Staffing

Anne Fennessy served as moderator for half of the groups, and Kevin Evanto moderated half. They guided participants through a broad conversation about their views on various aspects of transportation to a specific discussion about the nickel gas tax package, unmet needs, regional road and transit projects, and finally taxes and tolls.

In addition to Fennessy and Evanto, Kjris Lund of Lund Consulting and Laura Scales of Cocker Fennessy attended and recorded notes. All groups were video taped and audio taped.

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Overall Themes

1. Enforcement of existing laws, including HOV lane violations and aggressive driving behaviors, was a consistent theme. This issue was also raised in regard to future tolled facilities, especially HOT lanes, and it would be relevant to any advertising or promotional campaign encouraging better driving behaviors.
2. Participants wanted information about transportation plans, budgets, activities and timelines more easily accessible and understandable.
3. Participants described transportation improvements in terms of traffic flow rather than congestion relief.
4. Participants wanted investments in both roads and transit, and they wanted the systems integrated and coordinated. However, there was little consensus regarding the mix of roads and transit or the types of transit that should receive future investment.
5. Repairing or replacing the Alaskan Way Viaduct was identified in each group as the top transportation priority in the region. Participants' awareness of its vulnerability to earthquakes, as well as other safety issues, was high.
6. Participants were aware that transportation is expensive and new funds would need to be raised if more transportation projects were to be completed. They evaluated a project's success, as well as decisions on determining the sequence of phases of future projects, based on the impact on traffic flow and safety.
7. There was an underlying sense that transportation was tied to the region's economic health, and any future plans or tax increases should take into account the effects on business. Participants were also interested in incentives for businesses to promote alternative work hours or commuting choices for employees.
8. No one complained about not getting to vote on the recent five-cent gas tax increase this year, nor did they mention the gas tax failing in front of voters last fall only to have legislators pass an increase.
9. Participants knew they voted to limit car tabs to \$30, but no one is paying only \$30.
10. Participants were frustrated and confused about who is in charge of transportation, but they clearly wanted a comprehensive plan, as well as strong leadership to implement the plan.



Overall Findings

Driver Exhortation Project

“The more attempts we make to educate people the more good it would do.”

1. Participants raised a number of bad driving behaviors ranging from minor annoyances to potentially dangerous actions. The most often cited were:
 - Aggressive driving, such as tailgating and weaving in and out of lanes;
 - Doing other tasks while driving, such as talking on a cell phone, reading, eating, and applying makeup;
 - Merging issues, such as waiting until the last minute to merge, not letting others merge, and coming to a stop on a freeway entrance ramp rather than merging at speed;
 - Driving slowly in the passing lane;
 - Not using turn signals; and
 - Running red lights.
2. Participants were generally mixed as to whether they believed a state effort to publicize and promote better driving techniques and behaviors would be successful. Those who supported the idea pointed to other successful education campaigns such as “Click It or Ticket.” Those who did not favor the proposal believed there were better uses for scarce state funding because bad drivers would not pay attention to the campaign.

“I believe they passed a law about aggressive drivers who change lanes a lot, well...where are the police?”

3. Almost all participants believed that stronger enforcement of traffic laws and perhaps higher fines—with or without an educational campaign—was critical to changing driving behaviors.
4. Many participants suggested improving driver education courses in schools, believing that the best way to change bad driving behaviors is to prevent them from happening in the first place.



HOT Lanes & Tolls

“I was dead set against them, but if they impact what they’re working on, then they’re good.”

5. There was conditional support for placing tolls on expanded or rebuilt roads and bridges if: 1) the cost of the toll was “reasonable;” 2) the toll were removed once the structure was paid for; and 3) there were alternative, non-tolled routes available.
6. Some participants voiced concerns about tolls increasing traffic congestion for two reasons: 1) increasing traffic on side streets and alternative routes as drivers sought ways around tolled roads and bridges; and 2) slowing down when approaching and paying at toll booths.
7. Some participants expressed concern about the effects of tolls on transportation-dependent business like trucking and service delivery companies and on small businesses.

“Get out of congestion free card.”

8. The cost and effectiveness of cheating enforcement were raised in every area.
9. Some participants believed converting HOV and transit-only lanes to HOT lanes would increase congestion in those lanes and negatively affect transit.
10. Some participants expressed resentment and frustration that only “rich people” would be able to afford to travel in HOT lanes.

Project Information

“It’s like transportation is a fog for a lot of people. It’s been 10 years since some of this has been initiated and none of it’s done. It’s like putting a puzzle together.”

11. Participants were generally knowledgeable about transportation projects that were recently completed in their local areas and could provide specific examples. The exception to this was in Seattle, where respondents had a difficult time naming any recently completed projects.
12. Participants’ knowledge of improvements in other areas varied a great deal. For example, respondents in East King County and Pierce County could not name many projects outside of their own area. South King County participants were familiar with improvements in East King County and Pierce County. Participants in Seattle were



more familiar with projects in East King County and Snohomish County. Finally, Snohomish County participants named projects in all other areas.

Nickel Package

“If I know where the money’s going, I don’t mind it. But if I don’t see anything, then I have an issue.”

13. Male participants were keenly aware of the nickel gas tax increase, but female respondents were slow in naming the recent increase and were often unclear on the exact amount.
14. Participants had no knowledge of the projects being funded by the nickel gas tax increase or whether projects had even been selected or were still to be chosen.
15. Almost all respondents stated that they wanted to see a list of projects being funded by the nickel gas tax in an easy to read format.
16. Participants listed a number of ways in which they would like to receive information about the nickel projects, including a web site, e-mail updates, quarterly or annual mailings to all voters, public forums, reports at public libraries, signs at project sites, and regular updates in newspapers or on television. Participants wanted government to employ the more cost-effective methods.

Priorities

“The Alaskan Way Viaduct would be number one—I don’t want people dying because I am cheap.”

17. Every group placed the most urgency on fixing the Alaskan Way Viaduct, primarily due to safety concerns about the structure’s stability and vulnerability to earthquakes. There was recognition of the viaduct’s importance as a major transportation corridor and the negative impact on I-5 and surface streets if the viaduct was not operational.
18. All groups except Seattle mentioned “fixing” I-5, but they did not agree on exactly what to do. Many wanted to address I-5’s chokepoints and interchanges. Some advocated for additional general purpose lanes, while others favored HOV lanes.



“One thing is not the answer.”

19. Most people agreed that transit improvements would also be needed, but there was no consensus on whether it should be buses, light rail, monorail or a combination.
20. Most groups also suggested improving I-405 and investing in mass transit (generally some form of train or monorail as well as additional buses).
21. Projects such as SR-167, SR-509, SR-16 and SR-522 were mentioned as important in the areas in which those roads are located or nearby.

“Bring systems to where they work together and not against each other.”

22. There was a sense that whatever roads or freeways were expanded or improved, there also needed to be an integrated transit component. There was also an understanding that transit needed to have its own separate “lane” or right-of-way, but there was not agreement on whether that “lane” would be filled with busses, monorail or light rail, only that it should be some type “fast” transit.
23. The construction of new ferry terminals was not supported in any of the focus groups, but there was strong support for additional ferries.
24. There was no consensus about what projects to exclude from a regional transportation plan. Extending light rail in Seattle from the University District to Northgate, widening roads without restrictions, and placing tolls on new or expanded roads, bridges and freeways were strongly debated in each area.

“I care about all of it. Shouldn’t it work with all of it within the three counties? Get a three-county-wide group working together. It doesn’t seem like they work together now. Do they work together?”

25. There was a sense that a regional package should contain projects for all three counties and should improve transportation throughout the three-county transportation system, but that each county would not need to receive the same amount of funding.



Project Selection

“Improves time from X to Y.”

26. The criteria for setting priorities for selecting projects for funding, phasing projects and for evaluating if a project was successful were improved traffic flow, especially during peak hours and traffic safety.
27. Another measure of success was whether the project was completed on time and on budget.
28. Other important selection criteria were identified as:
 - Integration within the regional transportation and transit systems (connections with various modes and coordination of transit schedules);
 - Cost effectiveness (biggest bang for the buck);
 - Economic impact (positive benefits to small, large and transportation-dependent businesses);
 - Flexibility to meet future need and population growth (improvement and its positive effects will last for at least several years).

Transportation Funding

“I think people wouldn’t mind taxes if they saw progress.”

29. Participants knew there were several taxes and fees that funded transportation projects. However, most could only name the gas tax and “car tab” taxes.
30. There was agreement in all groups that additional funding was needed for both road and transit improvements to address transportation problems.
31. Maintenance was an important funding priority in all groups.

“No time is the right time. Let’s do it.”

32. There was agreement that there is never a good time for a vote on raising taxes.
33. User fees and tolls were funding solutions that were raised by participants in every group prior to any discussion of these issues by the moderator.



34. Most groups wanted to know exactly what projects were being funded by existing transportation taxes, and they wanted to know that these taxes were being spent efficiently and effectively before voting in favor of new funds.
35. Most participants were tolerant toward raising taxes if there was a clear, logical and comprehensive plan that prioritized long-term projects to address regional transportation problems. Most agreed this would be the most important factor for voters in deciding how to vote on a transportation tax measure. Most indicated a desire to know where and how the current money is being spent before approving new funds.
36. The passage of I-695 and the fact that no one pays \$30 for car tabs was raised in every group.

Tax Options

“I would rather pay the gas tax than others.”

37. Participants were generally tolerant of vehicle license fees if increases were moderate (defined as \$5-\$30). Many saw these flat fees as fair to all users, though others expressed their belief that those who use the roads more should pay more.
38. A local-option gas tax seemed to gain acceptance by many due to its linkage to use of roads—“those who drive more, pay more.” Some participants expressed concern about the effects of a local-option gas tax on transportation-dependent business like trucking and service delivery companies and on small businesses.
39. Most participants did not favor raising the sales tax to fund transportation projects. The sales tax was seen as regressive and unfair because it was not connected to transportation. Some participants suggested a sales tax on transportation products (spark plugs, oil, tires, etc.) might be acceptable.
40. The groups were mixed in their support of an increased motor vehicle excise tax to fund transportation. Some participants felt it was fair because “the rich would pay more than the poor.” Others thought it was not fair because the tax was not linked to how much someone used the transportation system or because they preferred a flat fee where everyone pays the same.
41. A general increase in the property tax to fund transportation was not supported by any of the groups.



42. Participants raised weight charges or some form of tax based on mileage as potentially acceptable options—these were seen as “user taxes.”

Gas Tax

“It explains why we don’t have a mass transit system.”

43. Most participants were surprised to learn that the state constitution limits the use of the gas tax to roads, highways and bridges. In response, most groups said the state constitution needed to be changed so the gas tax could be used to support both roads and transit.
44. There were participants who opposed changing the constitution to allow for other uses of the gas tax, but they did think there needed to be specific taxes to fund transit.

Accountability

“We need a transportation czar—someone who is elected—one person or one agency that could be held accountable and could cut through the crap!”

45. “Government” was regarded as having primary responsibility for handling transportation problems, but most participants acknowledged that the ultimate responsibility fell to voters.
46. Most participants wanted a single point of accountability—whether it was the governor or a “transportation czar”—so they would know exactly who was in charge.
47. Lack of connections and coordination among transportation and transit systems was as a major issue in all areas.

“Everyone is responsible—we all are responsible for who we elect”

48. Many voiced concerns about government’s inability to either lead or develop a long-range transportation plan. There was a sense that officials make transportation decisions based on politics rather than problems or needs.
- In terms of leadership, participants wanted recognized individuals who would make tough decisions on transportation issues.
 - In terms of planning, respondents wanted a clear understanding of why and how projects would be chosen, as well as confidence that once projects were finished, they would not be immediately overwhelmed by population growth.



49. The perceived mistakes of the past (multiple rebuilds of the SR-167/I-405 interchange and replacement of never-used rail tracks in the Downtown Seattle Transit Tunnel) added to the lack of confidence that participants expressed for government's ability to develop well thought-out, long-term plans.
50. There was frustration with the perceived inability of county governments to work together on a regional plan.

