Eastside Corridor Tolling Study: Public Open Houses

Open House Summary
September 3, 2009

Background
In 2009, the Washington State Legislature directed WSDOT to prepare a traffic and revenue study for Eastside Corridor tolling and to seek input from the public by January 2010. As part of the outreach process, we held three public open houses throughout the I-405 and SR 167 corridors. Additionally, members of the public were encouraged to provide feedback by e-mail, comment form, taking an online survey or talking with project staff at local summer fairs and festivals. WSDOT also conducted a statistically-valid phone survey and facilitated focus groups to gather input from the public. WSDOT will hold a second round of open houses in November before the study report is completed.

Overview
The first series of open houses for the Eastside Corridor Tolling Study were held August 18-20, 2009 from 4 to 7 p.m. at the Auburn Senior Activity Center, Bellevue City Hall and Renton High School. At each meeting, interested community members were provided the opportunity to review background information, consider study options, and view a ten-minute informational video. Key project team members were available to discuss the study with attendees. Approximately 86 community members attended the open houses to learn more about the project, review and comment on the information shared, and ask questions of the project team.

The purpose of this first series of open houses was to introduce the study, identify public concerns, distribute comprehensive background information, and provide information on what the study will consider. Attendees were encouraged to complete an online survey on laptops provided at the meeting. Comment forms were also available and participants were informed of the opportunity to submit email comments.

At each open house, attendees were asked to sign in upon arrival and received handouts (project fact sheet and Eastside Corridor funded project checklist). Display boards were arranged in stations around the room and project team members were assigned to specific stations to provide details and answer specific questions. The display boards included background information, how express toll lanes work, study options, the public involvement process, and related projects. All meeting materials, including copies of the display boards, are posted on the project Web site: http://wsdot.wa.gov/tolling/eastsidecorridor.

To advertise the event to both interested parties and a wide array of Eastside Corridor residents, WSDOT mailed over 220,000 postcard announcements, issued a press release, distributed e-mail invitations, ran display ads in area newspapers and online publications, placed flyers at key community locations, and advertised the meeting on community calendars and the project Web site.

The following summary highlights the advertising efforts and feedback received.

Auburn Senior Activity Center

Denise Cieri, Eastside Corridor Tolling Study project manager, explains express toll lanes to citizen at Bellevue City Hall

Comment Station – Auburn Senior Activity Center

Advertisements and Notifications

WSDOT advertised the open houses through a variety of methods. Postcards were mailed to approximately 225,000 residents and property owners within 2-miles of the I-405 Corridor announcing the open houses and encouraging them to take the online survey. In addition, WSDOT sent e-mail notices to approximately 7,249 interested parties on several project listservs. Display ads ran in 10 print publications and five online publications, reaching over 285,000 readers and securing nearly three million established impressions.

Other advertising and meeting notification included:

- Save-the-date flyer distributed at summer fairs and festivals
- Flyers and posters at community locations (i.e. city halls, community centers, etc)
- Press release to local media
- Announcement on project Web page and city community calendars

Open house postcard

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Advertising
Display ads to announce the open house were placed in the following publications:

Newspaper/Media Outlet	Advertisement Insertion Date(s)	Circulation
Seattle Times Eastside Edition	8/14-8/17/2009	64,187
Auburn Reporter	8/7, 8/14	29,421
Bellevue Reporter	8/8,8/12,8/16	40,227
Kirkland Reporter	8/5, 8/12	25,956
Kent Reporter	8/8, 8/12, 8/16	30,223
Redmond Reporter	8/8, 8/12, 8/16	25,089
Bothell/Kenmore Reporter	8/5, 8/12	21,341
Renton Reporter	8/7, 8/14	31,062
Daily Journal of Commerce	8,10, 8/12, 8/17, 8/19	3,880
Puget Sound Business Journal	8/14	17,535

Banners and online pop-up ads were featured on the following sites:

Media Outlet	Advertisement Run Date(s)	No. of Impressions Received
Seattle Times Online	8/10-8/20/2009	1,286,075
Seattle PI Online	8/10-8/20/2009	1,180,468
Colors NW	8/10-8/20/2009	326,795
Daily Journal of Commerce	8/10-8/20/2009	53,119
Sound Publishing • Auburn Reporter • Bellevue Reporter • Kirkland Reporter • Kent Reporter • Redmond Reporter • Bothell/Kenmore Reporter • Renton Reporter	8/1-8/30/2009	86,345

Seattle PI Online Display Ad
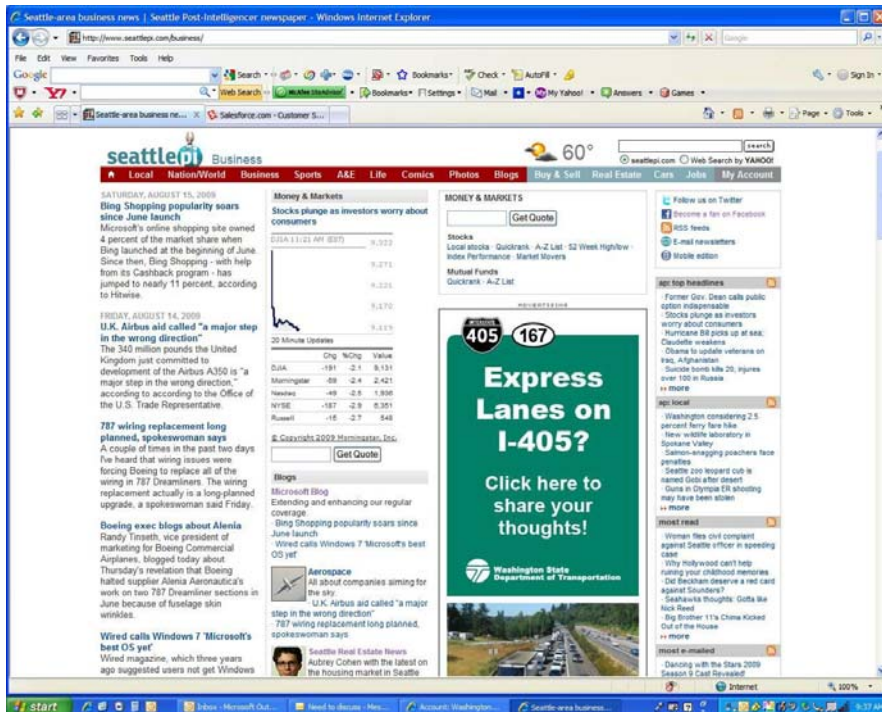
Community Calendars

WSDOT coordinated with local cities along the Eastside Corridor to include information about the open houses on community calendars and email listservs. The following cities posted announcements or distributed information.

City	Advertising Mediums
Auburn	Community calendar
Bellevue	Community calendar
Kenmore	Community calendar
Kirkland	City calendar, government access channel, employee intranet, Neighborhood News list-serv
Mercer Island	Community calendar
Newcastle	Community calendar, city blog
Puyallup	Community calendar
Renton	Web calendar, spotlight news page.
Sumner	Community calendar
Tukwila	City website

Comment Highlights

The following is an overview of the written public comments received at the first round of open houses. Direct quotes from interested parties are italicized to highlight the tone of the comments. In addition to comment forms filled out at the meetings, many people elected to e-mail comments or send in comment forms by mail.

Comment themes included:

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Congestion Relief

Several comments reflected support for toll lanes.

- *"Yes, the more the better –get them installed soon."*
- *"It should be a larger toll for longer distances. I favor tolling"*

Access Points and Safety

A few open house attendees commented on the limited number of access points on the existing SR 167 HOT lane system. Many comments cited safety as their largest concern.

- *"If it's like SR 167, then it's a bad idea. If someone is going slow you can't pass and in heavy traffic it's very hard to find a safe opening to exit to cross multiple lanes before your exit!"*
- *"I do not think the way 167 is used now is safe, limiting entrance and exit points"*
- *"The one HOV lane with tolls and the double white line is also hard for real HOV cars because there is no room to pass, or enough room to get over for exiting and entering."*

Transit

Several comments identified transit as a top priority, encouraging WSDOT to ensure express toll lanes benefit transit.

- *"We need more transit and lanes!"*
- *"Allow busses on SR 167 to enter the toll lanes earlier."*

Implementation

A few attendees suggested specific strategies for implementing an express toll lane system.

- *"Electronic tolling is the way things need to be. I'm ready and have been using my transponder on 167 already."*
- *"Better signage – it should be as clear to non-residents as it is to residents."*

Fairness

A number of attendees argued low income populations would not benefit from express toll lanes.

- *"I'm sorry to see those that can afford tolls get the same speed advantage as carpools."*
- *"This is terrible, rich cars pay, poor can wait."*
- *"Why should a single occupant vehicle be able to "buy" a priority of a lane at all? HOT lanes are a misguided way of controlling congestion by favored treatment of a privileged class of persons who may or may not pay the taxes for a high tech. tolling system."*