



Governor Chris Gregoire

GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT ACCOUNTABILITY & PERFORMANCE



Transportation Forum Summary

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The traffic death rate on Washington roadways has dropped to the lowest level in state history, and state agency leaders said today their ongoing law enforcement, public education and highway engineering practices should reduce fatalities even further. A total of 567 fatalities were recorded in 2007, representing 1 death per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. National statistics won't be out until this fall, but the directors said they are confident Washington's rate is among the lowest in the country.

The traffic safety report came during a GMAP accountability meeting in Olympia that focused on several transportation topics, including a report that high gas prices are contributing to double-digit inflation in highway construction costs, while declining fuel consumption is constricting the state's gasoline tax revenue.

Leaders of the Washington State Patrol (WSP), the Traffic Safety Commission (WTSC), and the departments of Transportation (WSDOT) and Licensing (DOL) also told Governor Gregoire's leadership team that collaboration between state and local law enforcement and traffic agencies has reduced the total number of fatal and serious injury accidents in targeted corridors, and has cut the time required to clear major highway blocking incidents such as fatal accidents, car-truck crashes, and fuel spills.

Traffic fatalities

Washington's fatality rate declined from 1.12 per 100 million vehicle miles traveled in 2006 to 1.00 last year. The agency officials said collaboration among their agencies and state-local partnerships are key to improving traffic safety.

One of the state's most important initiatives is the State Corridor Safety Program, in which state and local agencies identify traffic corridors with high accident rates and focus on enforcement, engineering, and education in those areas for 18 to 24 months to improve overall safety. Accidents and fatalities are measured before and after the projects are conducted. Twenty-eight such programs have been completed since 1991, and four are now under way in Seattle, Vancouver, Snohomish County, and the Spokane Valley. In the 28 corridors, fatal and serious injury collisions typically decline by more than one-third from pre-project levels.

Each of the agencies also contributes to statewide traffic safety efforts:

- WTSC Deputy Director Steve Lind said his agency conducts public education efforts to tell motorists how they can avoid or survive a collision.
- WSP Chief John Batiste said troopers use crash data to focus their enforcement efforts on high-risk locations;

- WSDOT Secretary Paula Hammond said her agency has received more than \$500 million since 2003 for safety improvement projects that have (1) reduced accident risks in new roadways, and (2) reduce the number of mishaps in high-accident corridors; and
- DOL Director Liz Luce said her agency provides direct education to high-risk groups such as teenage drivers, and will soon begin participating in the Statewide Corridor Safety Program.

Transportation project costs

Hammond and WSDOT chief operating officer Dave Dye said the rapid run-up in fuel prices is just one factor behind an 80% increase since 2000 in highway construction costs. Heavy demand for construction materials in China, India, and other developing nations has boosted prices for construction materials such as asphalt, concrete and steel. Contractors have to bid for projects many months or even years before the materials are purchased, so the prices they pay for materials are often much higher – and total project costs greater – than when bids were submitted.

Dye said it has been very difficult to accurately project construction cost hikes in the years since 2003, when voters approved funding for “Nickel” projects, and 2005, when money was authorized for Transportation Partnership Account (TPA) projects. In 2003, construction inflation was expected to be about 2.5% per year, he said. By 2006, the rate had reached nearly 20%, and as of mid-2008, the rate had jumped to nearly 60%.

Dye said economists have consistently predicted that the recent jump in construction costs won’t last. “The troubling part is that we’ve had this conversation for the past five years,” he said.

Office of Financial Management Director Victor Moore said the transportation budget faces an extremely challenging double-whammy in the 2009-2011 biennium. While rapidly rising gasoline prices are fueling construction inflation, Moore said, they are also causing consumers to reduce their driving and the amount of gas they buy – thereby eroding the state’s gas-tax revenue.

Noting the dramatic upturn in construction costs, Moore questioned whether the state could legitimately hope to bring in any of its upcoming construction projects “on-budget”. As of March 31, WSDOT reported it had completed 84% of 391 Nickel and TPA projects on-budget. Hammond explained that project cost estimates are often revised upward over time by the Legislature in the state transportation budget, and that the agency’s success rate is based on the “last legislative expectation.”

Incident Response

State Patrol and Transportation officials said they and their local partner agencies had met Governor Gregoire’s goal of reducing the time needed to clear major blocking accidents (those that require more than 90 minutes to clear) on nine key highways.. The average duration of those incidents was reduced from 174 minutes in the baseline period of 2005-06 to an average of 161 minutes in 2007. The agencies plan to establish a new, lower target later this month; Gregoire’s chief of staff, Cindy Zehnder, asked what it would take to achieve a further 5-percent reduction.

Analysis of major blocking incidents from July through September 2007 showed 66% were caused by a commercial vehicle; 57% occurred in King County; 54% involved just one vehicle; and 29% involved overturned vehicles.

For more information, visit:

<http://www.accountability.wa.gov/reports/transportation/default.asp>