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Seattle Times Op-ed: New regional transportation plan must put pragmatism over ideology
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Puget Sound residents concerned about the direction of transportation policy should review and comment on the new regional plan being developed by the Puget Sound Regional Council.

By Seattle Times editorial board
The Seattle Times

If you like how Seattle plans for traffic congestion, you'll love the new regional transportation plan that the Puget Sound Regional Council is developing.

A draft version of the plan includes controversial measures such as tolling roads across the region and adding per-mile driving fees. These measures are intended to both raise revenue and give government more tools to manipulate when and where people drive.

The PSRC is a wonky organization that's off the radar for most people. But its regional growth and transportation plans strongly influence policy in King, Pierce, Kitsap and Snohomish counties.

Inside players, including Seattle anti-car activists, recognize its importance. They lobby the PSRC to shape policy and the criteria it uses to divvy up federal transportation grants.

For instance, the state is just starting to study per-mile driving fees. Legislative action and public discussion is needed before this proceeds further. But by making these fees a cornerstone of the regional transportation plan, the PSRC pushes them toward certainty.

Residents concerned about the direction and priorities of regional transportation policies have an opportunity to have their voices heard. They can review the PSRC's draft transportation plan update and submit comments through Jan. 31.

Unfortunately, the public won't have access to a batch of recent data on how the PSRC's approach is working.

Results of the PSRC's spring 2017 travel survey, which informs planners about how Puget Sounders get around and how long it takes, were due in the winter of 2017. But they're delayed and won't be available until March.

The majority of residents, who make most of their trips in personal vehicles, already know how things are working out.

Freeway congestion in the central Puget Sound region is growing at a rate much greater than population growth, according to the state Department of Transportation. From 2014 to 2016, congestion on I-5, I-405 and I-90 increased 76 percent, 33 percent and 117 percent, respectively.

Seattle drivers wasted 55 hours stuck in peak-hour traffic during 2015, according to Kirkland

traffic-data company Inrix. Last year it ranked Seattle traffic 10th worst in North America and 20th worst in the world.

Inrix estimated these delays cost Seattle drivers \$1,590 on average that year. Citywide, the cost was \$1.9 billion.

Regional transportation plans and project rankings should factor the cost of congestion and time spent on slower modes of travel.

Instead, the PSRC gives more weight to transportation projects that “eliminate vehicle trips” than to projects that “improve traffic flow.”

PSRC’s prioritization system gives relatively low points to projects with a “demonstrable travel improvement for an identified problem that occurs during the peak hours of travel” or “a demonstrable travel improvement on a facility anticipated to have a future congestion issue.”

This year’s update to the regional transportation plan is an opportunity to make it more pragmatic and less ideological. For starters, the cost of travel time deserves as much consideration in the plan as adding more charges.

The PSRC should also wait for results of the state’s user-fee pilot project, and public dialogue on the merits of this approach, before making a long-range plan that assumes it will happen.

Editorial board members are editorial page editor Kate Riley, Frank A. Blethen, Donna Gordon Blankinship, Brier Dudley, Mark Higgins, Melissa Santos, William K. Blethen (emeritus) and Robert C. Blethen (emeritus).

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