



## Smart choices on transportation money?

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There has been much ink devoted to the challenges we face in the Puget Sound Region due to rapid population growth. Seattle itself is considered the fastest growing major city in the country. The result of all this growth is a debate about transportation that is not only rancorous within the confines of the city but in the Legislature as well. At times, a transportation mode war seems to pit bikes and transit against cars, and then there are the debates about how to pay for it all.

Is another fight forthcoming, or will we find compromise?

State Senate transportation leaders from both parties appear ready to push forward a transportation package. Four of them, two Republicans and two Democrats, rolled out a proposal last week to raise the gas tax 11.5 cents over three years to invest in the state's transportation infrastructure. This now sets the stage for a debate that will be familiar to anyone who reads the newspaper – urbanists in Seattle complaining too much money is devoted to roads, and suburban and rural legislators wanting more in reforms to the system. Chances are both sides will be disappointed.

The Seattle suburban-rural divide is real. And while the challenges are indeed political and ideologically driven, there is also a physical and economic dynamic that complicates resolution.

Those who would like to see Seattle model itself after Portland or San Francisco often ignore the physical location of the city and the economic realities that have shaped it and the region over the last century. The rest of the state depends on, and has heavily invested in, infrastructure that runs through and is located in the city. Additionally, Seattle's place in the region is changing due to population trends that may surprise.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1950 Seattle was home to 64 percent of King County's population. By the 1970s, Seattle was home to just 46 percent of the county's residents. Currently, that number is 32 percent. So while it is true that Seattle is growing quickly, it is also true that regional transportation systems carry more people at greater distances than ever before. And for all the cutting-edge jobs in King County, the large economic drivers of yesterday are still important today. Think Boeing, fishing, logistics, agriculture, trade and

manufacturing. Manufacturing alone accounted for 24 percent of all business revenues in 2013, according to the Washington State Department of Revenue.

A new report by former Seattle City Councilmember Peter Steinbrueck, the Seattle Sustainable Neighborhoods Assessment Project, shows that a significant share of Seattle residents work outside of Seattle. Job growth in the city has also lagged job growth in the county.

These dynamics illustrate how important it is to think regionally and even expand Steinbrueck's analysis to the rest of the Puget Sound and the State. Like it or not, Seattle is a gateway and a way station in addition to a destination, commercial center and nightlife hotspot.

And Seattle sits right at the crossroads of highways, air and sea ports, and bridges and tunnels that these and other industries depend on. One need only consider the chaos the current West Coast port slowdown is inflicting on any number of businesses to understand why this infrastructure is so important.

A perfect example of the dynamic pitting the experiential and entertainment city versus the working city is the Alaskan Way Viaduct compromise.

Freight users and many city businesses wanted a rebuild of the viaduct, because they mainly used it as a means to get through Seattle. This corridor can be called the industrial spine of the Puget Sound region. It connects Boeing's two manufacturing plants and airports, the North Pacific Fishing fleet, three major seafood producers, the city's two designated manufacturing industrial centers and the Port of Seattle.

Those living downtown or who use the waterfront wanted either a surface option or a tunnel. The tunnel became the compromise position. By definition compromises generally leave everyone feeling a little angry.

During his State of the City speech Tuesday, Seattle Mayor Ed Murray announced a new transportation initiative called "Move Seattle." The biggest part of the plan will likely be to put together a new local transportation package to renew the expiring Bridging the Gap Levy (due to the fact that the gap between infrastructure needs and realities appears not to have been bridged by the last levy). While we won't know for some time all the components of the plan, the mayor said something encouraging in his speech: "Seattle is not an island."

There are consequences for Seattle if elected leaders fail to grasp this simple truth. Legislators in Olympia will be making some big decisions over the next few years, which will require deals to be made between both Republicans and Democrats. It could all blow up very easily. It has in the past.

We have to be smart about how we use our money, in Seattle and elsewhere. Sometimes, costs are hidden but impact affordability and access to the city. Ironically, one of the worst offenders is

a trendy and fun little thing called a streetcar. Across the U.S., cities are grabbing federal dollars to help install streetcar lines. The [Economist reported](#) on the phenomenon while quoting from experts at the left-leaning Brookings Institution and the right-leaning Cato Institute to show that streetcars are a bit of a boondoggle. Worse, the streetcar lines facilitate money being taken from transportation that serves middle- and low-income people — who, as [Brookings reports](#), are increasingly moving to Seattle’s suburbs, where buses are the true mass transit — in favor of a mode that is mostly used by the wealthy and tourists. When Cato and Brookings agree, we should probably pay attention.

The balancing act of creating great urban spaces, well served by transit while growing the economic sectors that have flourished through many turns of the business cycle is the challenge we face in this region. But, how lucky we are to have this sort of challenge.