

## POLICY NOTE

# WSDOT Secretary consults with political advocates about how to respond to WPC study, has no real dispute with our data

By Mariya Frost, Director, Coles Center for Transportation

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### Key Points

1. A 2019 WPC study by Wendell Cox found that public transit has little potential to serve employment destinations outside of downtown Seattle.
2. The study emphasized that transportation planning should focus on access to jobs.
3. WPC asked for feedback from the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) on the study, but never heard back.
4. Through public disclosure, WPC found WSDOT had drafted a response but never sent an official response.
5. WSDOT's complaints are largely around methodology and authorship, without any real dispute with our data.
6. A thoughtful and data-focused reply should have been compiled and sent, which would have contributed to the public's understanding of transportation policy and spending.

### Introduction

In 2019, Washington Policy Center asked national transportation expert Wendell Cox to evaluate transportation planning in the Puget Sound region. He looked at data showing where people choose to live, where they choose to work, and how they choose to travel. Specifically, he addressed the policy question: does our regional transportation plan reflect reality or wishful thinking?

### Study findings

The independent study, "Moving Toward More Accessible and Productive Transportation in Puget Sound," examined Puget Sound area population, employment densities, and transit and traffic patterns. His assessment found that public transit has little potential to serve employment destinations outside of downtown Seattle.

*"Fewer than 15 percent of the jobs in the Puget Sound are in downtown Seattle, yet downtown accounts for about 60 percent of the transit work trip destinations," said Cox. He added, "The only way to serve the overwhelming majority of jobs outside downtown is by car. To continue down the current path is to diminish job prospects and mobility for area workers."*

The study included 11 findings, the last three of which summarize the most important points:

- In the Seattle metropolitan area (King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Kitsap counties) automobile access to employment within 30 minutes is 19 times that of transit.
- Even to downtown Seattle, where transit access is by far the best in the Puget Sound, automobile access is more than triple that of transit within 30 minutes.
- The principal finding of this analysis is that: There is no potential, at any cost, for public transit to materially reduce driving or to reduce traffic congestion in the Puget Sound region. This finding is supported by Puget Sound Regional Council (PSRC) projections, at least for the next two decades.

Noting the technological advances in assessing job access, the study suggested that "transportation planning should principally focus on access. Individual projects and packages of projects should be evaluated

on the extent to which they improve access and their cost-effectiveness in achieving such improvements.”

It concluded that such an approach would be “likely to improve economic performance (such as job creation and economic growth) by facilitating additional employment opportunities, leading to greater affluence and less poverty.”

### **Poor response from transportation officials**

WPC shared the study and asked for feedback from both the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and PSRC in December of 2019. Josh Brown, Executive Director of the PSRC, simply responded with, “Thanks for the report” but did not provide additional feedback.

WSDOT Secretary, Roger Millar, responded with, “Thanks for this. We’ll take a look and get back to you. What’s your deadline?” We suggested January or February to provide several weeks for comment, but then never heard back.

### **The response that was never sent**

A few weeks ago, through an unrelated public disclosure request, I received e-mails from WSDOT showing they had worked on a draft response after all and had consulted with Sound Transit and PSRC, as well as political and transit advocacy groups Futurewise and Transportation Choices Coalition.<sup>1</sup> When asked, the agency confirmed they never sent an official response to WPC, despite working on a draft.

WSDOT’s draft response had a few contentions, including:

- **Engagement and Data Sources:** Secretary Millar states that Washington Policy Center should have contacted regional transportation agencies before writing the study and that we do not “fully comprehend the challenges – political, financial, geographical, and others – in this region.” He also argues that we didn’t use enough local data outside of PSRC and the American Community Survey. This claim is simply inaccurate.

Our study cites considerable local and regional data reported to the federal government and included local and regional data from sources including Commute Seattle and Sound Transit. Millar does not dispute the accuracy of any of our actual data and, despite his position as head of the Department of Transportation, offers no meaningful contrary data regarding employment or trip distribution.

- **Housing and Land Use:** Millar claimed the study, “does not directly acknowledge the nexus between transportation options, affordable housing, and land use.” While the report does not use Millar’s preferred terminology, its entire thrust is the issue of access. There is no more important goal in transportation than to get the maximum number of people to access the greatest number of job opportunities within 30 minutes.

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<sup>1</sup> Draft response from WSDOT written in December 2019, obtained through public disclosure in August 2021, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/library/docLib/WPC-DRAFT-response-bt-kr-TTP-RM-003-.docx>.

- **Transportation Choices:** Secretary Millar believes any travel time savings from congestion relief will be lost due to induced demand,<sup>2</sup> a flawed theory that says if you supply more of any product, more people will want it. Transit advocates who apply the theory to road construction say that building more lanes will cause people to drive more, filling up any new capacity and making traffic congestion worse than before. However, they fail to apply this theory consistently, arguing that congestion will improve if people switch from cars to taking transit or riding bikes, creating more space on the road (which should just be filled up according to their theory).

Despite billions spent on public transit over the years and billions more expected to be spent by 2040, regional planners admit transit's work trip market share will not increase substantially.<sup>3</sup> They even say we should expect traffic congestion to get worse. Driving will continue to be an important part of our lives.

Research shows that large investments in freeway capacity can yield good results. The 2012 Texas A&M Transportation Institute's Urban Mobility Report shows 17 cities that increased capacity to keep up with the growth in driving (to within 10 percent of vehicle miles traveled) have seen decreasing traffic congestion since 1997.<sup>4</sup>

- **Consultant Selection:** Lastly, Secretary Millar stoops to ad hominem attacks, stating that Cox is a "proponent of auto-centric development" so it's not surprising that the study "downplays the positive contributions that transit and other options have on congestion mitigation." On the contrary, Cox is a demographer and national urban policy expert whose values have been readily published online in an invited European journal essay<sup>5</sup> and on Demographia's website<sup>6</sup> as follows: "The objective of urban policy should be to achieve widespread affluence and eradicate poverty" and that this "requires transport that maximizes mobility and minimizes travel times."

## Conclusion

Washington Policy Center's independent study is thorough, data-centric, and offers a way forward that is responsive to how people live, work and travel in the Puget Sound region. WSDOT's three-page draft is largely an unfounded complaint about methodology and authorship. A thoughtful and data-focused reply should have been compiled and sent, which would have contributed to the public's understanding of

2 "Induced demand is the latest excuse to do nothing for roads," by Mariya Frost, Blog, Washington Policy Center, January 2, 2020, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/detail/induced-demand-is-the-latest-excuse-to-do-nothing-for-roads>.

3 "Guess what? Government officials say you'll be stuck in traffic for years to come," by Mariya Frost, Blog, Washington Policy Center, April 5, 2019, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/publications/detail/guess-what-government-officials-say-youll-be-stuck-in-traffic-for-years-to-come>.

4 "2012 Urban Mobility Report," Texas A&M Transportation Institute, December 2012, at <https://static.tti.tamu.edu/tti.tamu.edu/documents/umr/archive/mobility-report-2012.pdf>.

5 "Toward More Prosperous Cities," by Wendell Cox, Op-ed, World Streets, December 14, 2012, at <https://worldstreets.wordpress.com/2012/12/17/op-ed-toward-more-prosperous-cities/>.

6 "Toward More Prosperous Cities: a framing essay on urban areas, planning, transport, and the dimensions of sustainability," by Wendell Cox, Demographia, December 17, 2012, at <http://demographia.com/towardmoreprosperous.pdf>.



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transportation policy and spending. If this draft is WSDOT's collective effort at a robust response – it is a failed effort.

We have responded to this draft because of our disappointment that such an unresponsive product could have survived multiple reviews within WSDOT. We can only hope that, in the final analysis, the draft was not sent in recognition that it was totally ineffective and evasive.