

Growing to Reduce - Regional Perspectives On Our Per Capita Transportation Impacts

A Presentation for "Focus The Nation" Community Forum

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* **Factoid:** In 2000, 15,000 workers commuted into Thurston County each morning and 30,000 commuted out of the County, mostly to Pierce and King counties.

By 2025 these figures will double to 30,000 workers commuting into the region and 60,000 commuting out of it.

* **Factoid:** One in four Thurston County workers commute out of county to work. Factoid: More than half of all single family homes built since 2000 are owned by families with at least one out-of-county commuter. Factoid: 30% - 50% of all workers in east Thurston County commute to Pierce or King Counties.

* **Factoid:** Since 2001, achieved residential net densities are 8.2 units per acre in Lacey, 7.1 units per acre in Olympia, and 5.5 units per acre in Tumwater. Factoid: Basic bare-bones fixed-route transit service requires a minimum of seven units per acre and a mix of adjacent non-residential uses through-out its service area in order to be a cost-effective service.

Cars pollute. They pollute the air we breathe and the water that runs off our streets. Hybrid or Hummer, electric Zapcar or biodiesel bug, the primary mode of transport in our community is the personal vehicle - and they all pollute.

Certainly one way to reduce transport-generated air pollution is to improve vehicle technology. Research and literature on the subject is vast and progress is rapidly being made. It must be – it will be – part of any future solution for this community as it will be all over the world.

Another way to reduce transport-generated air pollution is to reduce the amount of driving we do. That's what I'm going to talk about today. How to reduce the per capita vehicle miles traveled in our community. Our Community Per Capita VMT. And I'm going to follow a particular angle that you may find surprising, or may not. But it's one that I think we're overdue in discussing if we're serious about reducing the air quality impacts of our region's transportation system.

Before I do so, though, I need to make a couple of disclosures.

First, while I find it occasionally interesting to talk about life after peak oil it's not a future scenario I see as being very plausible and since this is my presentation I get to make that assumption. So I'm ruling out the possibility that personal vehicles will no longer exist and reductions in Per Capita VMT will occur naturally. I believe we have to take deliberate, active steps to reduce our Per Capita VMT.

Second, we're going to grow and I don't waste a whole lot of time bemoaning that basic fact. Questioning growth is a good thing to do – question everything. But in my opinion we've distracted ourselves far too long as a community with many unproductive no-growth fights without understanding what we're fighting and why. And in the process we've lost some valuable opportunities to embrace growth and to rectify mistakes we made in the last fifty years.

See, I don't think that growth in and of itself is inherently bad. In fact, I think that as a community we better start embracing growth if we hope to ever reverse our growing Community Per Capita VMT in the Thurston region.

VMT is the shorthand way of saying vehicle miles traveled. It refers to a cumulative sum total of miles traveled by all vehicles in an area. It's widely used as a metric for a variety of different transportation performance measures. Today I'm going to use it as the conceptual metric for our per capita transportation impacts on air quality in the Thurston region.

Here is your VMT data for the day. There were almost 7.5 million vehicle miles traveled in the Thurston region every day in 1998 and there were over 9 million vehicle miles traveled every day in 2006. At the same time our population went from 198,435 to 231,100.

Now, let's take the total daily VMT in 1998 and divide it by the population, and do the same for 2006 to come up with a standardized "average per capita VMT". And we see that in 1998 our per capita VMT was 37.7 vehicle miles traveled per day while in 2006 – after investing millions and millions of dollars in alternatives – our per capita VMT average has increased to 39.0 miles per day!

Don't get me wrong; these are not real "miles driven" numbers. Real people drive a whole lot more and real people drive a whole lot less. Be careful when people start throwing VMT numbers at you. They get used as if they're solid, statistically valid numbers but they're indicators. Don't get fooled into thinking they are anything other than that. That said, they are very useful figures and have good application in various planning processes. And in this context they suggest that not only are there more of us but we're all driving more.

A reason to strive for a reduction in our overall Community Per Capita VMT is that reductions in that figure will be beneficial to the environment.

A reduction simply means that our overall transportation needs are being met more efficiently. Maybe we've reduced our need to travel. Maybe we've changed the way we travel, either by mode or route. Whatever the reason, though, a reduction in per capita VMT means we're more efficient with our transportation resources, and that efficiency translates into reduced per capita environmental impacts associated with transportation, air quality and otherwise.

In 1995 or so I was asked to talk to a class of 5th graders at Hansen Elementary School as part of their civics program. I was fascinated to learn that the students were well into the development of a SimCity model of Olympia. They'd put lots of thought into the location of essential public facilities like sewer and solid waste disposal, schools, parks, hospitals, and libraries. And their transportation system was comprised solely of trolleys and pathways, with no streets for vehicles. There were no cars in this city they were creating. They explained to me how this supported the development of the residential and commercial areas on which they were currently working. Trains provided a basic north-south and east-west network and people walked and biked to the train from all other points. That particular day it was pouring down rain so I pushed them a little bit and asked how I'd get my groceries home from the train on a rainy day like today if I lived in their city. The young man in the front row right in front of me didn't miss a beat. He looked up at me and said, "You wear a hat, lady!" And that was that!

Today I have a good hat. And good rain gear. And warm clothes. And a flashlight, walking shoes, overshoes, gloves, reflective gear, backpack, ice cleats, and a place to change clothes

at work so I can walk the two and a half miles between work and home year round instead of driving.

I could try to assert then, that walking is a viable mode of transportation for this trip. Someone else could as easily assert I'm nuts. And they might be right.

The more extraordinary the effort people have to go to the less likely something other than driving will be a viable choice. We're actively working to make alternatives like biking, walking, and transit viable choices in addition to driving. To that end our communities have invested tens of millions of dollars and developers much more than that in bike lanes and sidewalks. And we currently spend tens of millions of dollars a year on transit service.

So why are people still driving so much?

Frankly, our urban areas aren't very urban. They're not urban enough to support more efficient alternatives than we already have. We have an exceptional level of service for cyclists, pedestrians, and transit riders when you look at the lack of urban character throughout our community.

Here's why I say we desperately need growth – thoughtful, well-designed, well-executed growth – if we are going to curb our Community Per Capita VMT. It's because without it we will never be able to escape the wasteful, inefficient suburban land use patterns we've been cultivating for the last 60 years and that we seem to cling to now.

The growth management vocabulary we use to describe our land use character is indicative of our problem. We refer to "urban" and "rural" Thurston County, as if Lacey, Olympia, Tumwater and their urban growth areas are actually truly urban in character and everything outside of that is rural in character. The fact is, from a transportation perspective we are neither urban nor rural – not even remotely. We are suburban, from the tip of Cooper Point Peninsula to recently-converted agriculture and resource lands in the furthest reaches of southeast Thurston County. With very few exceptions our "rural" lands are dominated by low density suburban lifestyles, not agricultural or resource-based ones. And our one true city center, downtown Olympia, is decidedly more suburban in character than urban. Unfortunately the only mode of transport that is somewhat efficient at serving the mobility and access needs of low density suburban communities is the car.

It takes a whole lot more than putting sidewalks and bike lanes and buses on every street to make transportation alternatives work. Urban transportation objectives that make biking, walking, and transit viable alternatives to driving require a built environment with urban characteristics in order to work effectively.

That urban environment has much more intensity and diversity of activity located in close proximity to each other than we currently have anywhere in our region today.

It supports residential and employment densities that enable a variety of transit choices. Fifteen units per acre is medium-density for single family neighborhoods in an urban environment and jobs are counted in the hundreds per acre. This allows fixed-route bus service to be extended to more neighborhoods with more frequency and alternatives like express service and trolleys become financially feasible. It puts more homes within convenient walking or biking distance of jobs and services.

The urban environment supports the building heights sufficient that developers can build internal parking structures, undertake the expensive financing and construction techniques associated with mixed use development, offer a range of housing products and prices within the same building, and still manage to make a profit after assuming the financial risk. This allows many different activities and needs that people engage in on a regular basis – home, work, services, civic, recreation – to be located close enough that walking is easier and more convenient than driving. The urban environment grows up, not out. Height restrictions limit the potential viability of many of the most likely areas for this kind of development in this region.

The urban environment compensates for the loss of personal yard and garage space so characteristic of our suburban patterns. It provides a vast array of amenities and activities that make “city life” an attractive lifestyle choice even though that choice may not include space for a personal car. It’s not a sacrifice to live without a car in a healthy urban environment; it’s a convenience.

Urban transport cannot function without a dense, inter-connected city street grid. This makes all modes of transport efficient by providing more route choices for all travelers and enables access to activities and destinations of all types. Street connectivity is as integral to the urban transport system as are the cars, transit, pedestrians, and cyclists that use them. Although a part of each cities’ street standards, “connected streets” are fighting words in many neighborhoods, hindering development of that essential network.

Right now there’s a disconnect between our urban transport ideals and our suburban land use reality. And that disconnect is going to continue to undermine our best intentions to reduce our Community Per Capita VMT.

But for a variety of reasons – some of our choosing and some well beyond our control – we have newly emerging opportunities to align our transportation and land use objectives and in the process, increase the viability of more efficient transport choices. The question is, are we ready to realize these opportunities?

Our ability to truly begin reducing our per capita VMT hinges on our ability to achieve truly urban land use patterns. I’m going to close by talking about recent events I’m seeing that give me cause for guarded optimism that we will be able to achieve this objective.

While there is much emphasis on downtown Olympia redevelopment, I’m suggesting that there are two bigger opportunities for significant urban development and redevelopment in our region in the next five to ten years: Lacey’s Hawks Prairie and Olympia’s Westside. These are the two economic engines of the Thurston region. And it will take economic investments far beyond anything the public sector can hope to make in the foreseeable future to create the urban environment needed to support our long-term transportation objectives.

While those of us in government study and revise our plans and regulations and codes and look to the past for clues to tomorrow’s trends, the private sector is looking forward. It is already retooling its commercial and residential development projects in response to changes in market forces. These changes are in turn driving changes in regional demographics and market demand that we never envisioned when we put our plans in place oh so many years ago.

In a very short amount of time land in Thurston County has gone from dirt cheap to premium priced and the private sector is responding accordingly. Land is too expensive to financially justify low-density suburban development. The private sector is looking to intensify the mix and

density of uses, both from what is on the ground today and also what is in our plans. They need more people to walk through the doors of their business or office than they can provide parking spaces for. They are challenging us to think creatively, to be proactive, and to work with them to develop a different kind of transportation system to serve the very different kind of community they are about to build.

Right now private sector developers on Olympia's west side and Lacey's Hawks Prairie are the transportation progressives in this community. They're the ones asking about reduced parking requirements, thinking creatively about ways of increasing the frequency and mix of transit services, and better integrating transportation into the development mix so that their buildings are more accessible to pedestrians and better integrated into the fabric of the community.

Developers are requesting variances to add more building height so they can put residential uses over commercial and retail uses where right now it is not allowed. They're challenging conventional wisdom about high capacity transit and its role in stimulating the kind of development activity we want to see in 15 or 20 years. They're challenging government to think proactively instead of the perpetual reactive thinking to which we've grown accustomed.

Tri Vo's Gateway Project may be the first truly urban development this region will see. And developers on Olympia's west side are taking on the challenge of rethinking and redefining the suburban commercial environment virtually on their own, trying to harness rapidly emerging opportunities to transform that area into a more vibrant, mixed-use urban environment.

I'm going to leave you with two more factoids.

★ **Factoids:** At least 40% of all the housing stock that will be available in the Thurston region in 2030 will be built between now and then. One third of the jobs that exist will be created between now and then. Where those homes and jobs are located and the kind of community they generate will help determine whether we are more auto-oriented or less-auto oriented as a region in 2030 than we are right now. Will that Community Per Capita VMT be the same or bigger in 2030? Or will it be smaller? We need growth to open up transportation opportunities that will benefit the entire region, opportunities that are beyond our reach today.