

# Transportation Issues in Spokane County

## Background on Growth Management

The Growth Management Act (GMA) became law in July 1990. Spokane County began planning under the GMA in 1998.

In the GMA, the Transportation goal is: *Encourage efficient multimodal transportation systems that are based on regional priorities and coordinated with county and city comprehensive plans.*

Subsequent GMA amendments that relate to transportation are:

- 2005 – **Biking and pedestrian** component included in the transportation element.
- 2006 – **Regional transportation governance bill.** RCW 47.80 deals with governance of regional transportation planning and funding, as well as allows more flexibility for local funding decision. It impacts how jurisdictions address transportation on a regional level in their GMA planning.

What follows are pieces of the regional planning in Spokane County.

## Spokane Regional Transportation Council

[www.srtc.org](http://www.srtc.org)

SRTC is the federally designated Metropolitan Planning Organization for Spokane County. Regional transportation planning requires an understanding of the past, recognition of current conditions, and the ability to provide an economically achievable, environmentally balanced, and consumer-friendly transportation system that enables the Spokane community to reach its full potential.

**Responsibilities:** As a local intergovernmental agency, SRTC encourages coordination and collaboration between planning and transportation departments in the City of Spokane, City of Spokane Valley, Spokane County, the Washington State Department of Transportation and small cities and towns in order to assure cohesive connectivity throughout Spokane County. (*Interlocal Agreements* between the agencies listed above have designated the Spokane Regional

Transportation Council (SRTC) to carry out the planning.

SRTC maintains the Transportation Improvement Plan, a three-year list of state and federally funded transportation projects, as well as the Metropolitan Transportation Plan, a 20-year document mapping the future of transportation in Spokane County.

**Transportation Modelers' Group:** Modeling is the method of forecasting how society will use the transportation system now and in the future. Modeling analysis explores various modes of travel including bus, light rail, auto, and carpool. Transportation modeling also considers the demand on the transportation system. This socioeconomic method assists the public, community leaders and the regional SRTC partner agencies (Spokane County, City of Spokane, City of Spokane Valley, Washington State Department of Transportation and Spokane Transit Authority) in making future transportation decisions and investments.

**Services offered by SRTC:** Services SRTC offers to local governments include transportation monitoring, transportation modeling, census information and analysis, travel demand forecasting, historical traffic count analysis, geographical information services, trip generation rates and traffic analysis zone data. SRTC offers each of these services in fulfillment of its mission:

*"SRTC provides for the safe and efficient movement of people and goods into, within, and through the Spokane Region with an integration of balanced multi-modal transportation choices."*

**Spokane Regional Transportation Management Center:** The SRTC suite of offices also houses the Spokane Regional Transportation Management Center, a multi-jurisdictional control facility to enhance and support advanced transportation management capabilities. Operators control devices used to monitor and control traffic, such as closed-circuit TV cameras, message signs, traffic

measurement stations and highway advisory radio stations.

### **Current SRTC Projects:**

**Bigelow Gulch Urban Connector:** Spokane County proposes to widen and improve Bigelow Gulch to make it safer, accommodate more traffic and allow freight to move through the area more easily. The proposed urban connector alignment would be constructed along the existing Havana Street/Bigelow Gulch Road corridor. It would begin near the Bigelow Gulch/Havana Street intersection and end at the Sullivan Road/ Wellesley Avenue intersection. The plan is currently under review by the Washington State Department of Transportation and Federal Highway Administration.

**Bridging the Valley:** a series of projects that will separate vehicle traffic from train traffic in the 42 mile corridor between Spokane, Washington and Athol, Idaho. The separation of railroad and roadway grades in this corridor—which currently includes 75 railroad/roadway crossings—will promote future economic growth, traffic mobility, traffic safety, and train whistle noise abatement. The BTV projects includes constructing road overpasses or underpasses at most existing railroad/ roadway crossings on the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF) corridor, as well as relocating the existing Union Pacific (UPRR) mainline between Spokane and Athol to an alignment within BNSF's mainline corridor, thus eliminating all mainline at-grade crossings on the UPRR line. [www.bridgingthevalley.org](http://www.bridgingthevalley.org)

**East Valley/West Rathdrum Prairie Transportation Study (EVWRP)** SRTC is conducting a regional transportation study of the eastern portion of the Spokane Valley and west Rathdrum Prairie, from Sullivan Road in Spokane Valley to Highway 41 in Post Falls and S.R. 290 (Trent Avenue) to the ridge along Mica Peak. The study area includes the urban areas of the City of Liberty Lake, the eastern portion of the City of Spokane Valley, and Post Falls, Idaho. This study will, evaluate existing and future conditions, identify potential improvements, examine alternate routes and modes of transportation, and ultimately provide recommendations for reasonable improvements.

**I-90 Traffic Incident Management Plan** This project involves developing a traffic incident response plan to efficiently manage traffic incidents on Interstate 90. The plan will be developed under the guidance of the Spokane Regional Transportation Management Center Operations Board, which is composed of traffic professionals from regional agencies and jurisdictions. The goals and objectives of this plan are to reduce congestion through providing information to travelers, improving incident response time, protecting emergency response personnel and improving air quality by reducing vehicle emissions. This plan will ultimately expand with increased implementation of ITS (Intelligent Transportation Systems) devices along regional corridors.

**Monroe-Lincoln Corridor Study Final Report** released by SRTC in 2001 outlined four alternatives (various couplet options on Monroe and Lincoln/Post), plus a no build option to provide better traffic flow in this corridor north of the Spokane River. SRTC recommends a Context Sensitive Design because of the historic buildings, high number of pedestrians and major traffic generators. The area continues to be involved in land use considerations, especially on the land west of Monroe on the north bank.

**Regional Concurrency** A comprehensive feasibility study of the implications of a regional transportation concurrency system with respect to legal, economic, land use and social equity issues.

**University District Study** The City of Spokane's Department of Public Works and Utilities is funding a University District/Downtown Traffic Study.—an analysis of downtown traffic flow conditions and propose alternative recommendations which may include signal timing revisions, flow directional alternative recommendations and/or revisions to on-street parking. The study will cover: analysis of existing traffic volumes and trends, forecast future traffic volumes, trip distribution and trip assignment and review previous plans and studies to determine which components of each study are feasible.

## **Smart Routes, Spokane (Bicycle and Pedestrian Resources) [www.smartroutes.org](http://www.smartroutes.org)**

In early 2008, Spokane Regional Transportation Council, Spokane Regional Health District, local political and business leaders, community activists, walking and bicycling advocates, and local planners and engineers got together to encourage people to find an alternative to driving alone. They discovered that the Spokane area needs extensive improvements to our bike and pedestrian facilities, and a lot of money is needed to do that.

In response, the 'SmartRoutes 2010' initiative was developed; an application and case statement for up to \$50 million in grant money for transportation projects. [The '2010 Campaign for Active Transportation,' initiated by the Rails To Trails Conservancy \(RTC\),](#) has a goal of doubling the non-motorized transportation budget from \$4.5 billion to \$9 billion in the next federal transportation budget.

Bicycling and walking are simple and efficient, low-impact modes of travel that don't contribute to air pollution or traffic congestion. Well-designed, strategically located non-motorized facilities can also increase public transit ridership such as buses by providing better access to transit for more people. In addition, bicycle and pedestrian facilities can provide for economic development in downtowns, urban centers, and other mixed-use areas.

SRTC is committed to providing more and safer opportunities to walk and bike, and is working with communities throughout the region to plan for and implement effective non-motorized projects and programs.

## **Overview of Spokane Transit Authority [www.spokanetransit.com](http://www.spokanetransit.com)**

Spokane Transit Authority (STA) is a municipal corporation formed in 1981 when voters approved the establishment of the Public Transportation Benefit Area (PTBA) and adopted a three-tenths of one percent sales tax as part of its financial support. A

nine-member Board of Directors governs STA. The Chief Executive Officer is responsible for bus service, Paratransit and Vanpool programs.

STA operates 151 buses and vans on 40 different routes within the PTBA, which is comprised of 248 square miles within Spokane County. Currently, nearly ten million fixed-route bus rides are provided annually. The Paratransit fleet of 67 STA vans, plus 37 vans operated by First Transit under contract with STA, transport more than 500,000 passengers per year. The Vanpool program operates with a fleet of 94 vans making nearly 167,000 commuter trips per year.

Funding for STA operations comes from local sales and use tax, assistance from the Federal Transit Administration and fare revenues. A major source of revenue for STA was lost in 1999 with the repeal of the state Motor Vehicle Excise Tax (MVET).

Voters approved three-tenths of one percent sales tax support on May 18, 2004, and then approved continuation of the sales tax funding with no sunset clause on May 20, 2008.

Currently the STA Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) is recommending a fare increase to the STA Board. The CAC is proposing that fares be increased in two phases between now and January 2011 – to \$1.25 in Sept 2009 and then \$1.50 for both fixed route and Paratransit fares. A new fare category to be added would charge a premium fare for express service. Other fare categories will remain.

The CAC is proposing this system-wide fare increase because:

- The last fare increase was in 2002
- Declining sales tax revenue has long-term impact.
- Increased ridership alone does not meet revenue demand.
- Increased operational costs.

STA and the CAC are currently taking public input. Check out the STA website for opportunities or call 343-1653. The CAC is fully considering all input before making a formal recommendation to the March 19, 2009, STA Board Meeting.

## **The Inland Empire Rail Transit Association**

[www.inlandrail.org](http://www.inlandrail.org)

*InlandRail* is a non-profit\*, non-partisan citizens group dedicated to advocating for rail transit as part of a more balanced transportation network for the Eastern Washington and Northern Idaho region, promoting sustainable growth, economic vitality, affordable citizen mobility, and increased community character.

*InlandRail* believes:

- A truly robust regional transportation system is comprised of many elements: **local transit/circulation/feeder service** (bus/ streetcar/ vanpool/ others); **sub-regional transit service** (express bus/bus rapid transit); and **regional transit service** (light rail transit).
- Transit-oriented development is an economic development phenomenon numerous studies have shown to associate with fixed rail-based transit systems in a synergistic, beneficial manner related in some way to the predictability and "mystique" of rail travel.
- The [ballot measures](#) sponsored by Spokane Transit Authority (STA) in 2006 were very confusing. Notably, despite limited time for public outreach, the [final vote](#) was surprisingly close, each of the two measures failing by only a few percentage points. Nonetheless, STA views the vote as a mandate for no additional action at this time.
- Considering the severely time-constrained educational campaign preceding the 2006 vote, the unfavorable but extremely close voting margin belies a regional readiness to continue planning for a future light rail system.

## **North County Transportation**

Currently Special Mobility Services offers two buses that travel between Spokane and Deer Park. The bus will pick up residents in Deer Park, Colbert, Riverside, Chatteroy and Mead, within one mile from Highway 2 and 395. Riders must call 534-7171 to schedule a ride (\$3.00 round trip).

## **North Spokane Corridor**

According to WSDOT this project that we have called the North/South Freeway, addresses the need for a major improvement to allow motorists and freight to move through metropolitan Spokane along the corridor from I-90 to US 395 at Wandermere. The needs of the corridor are indicated by increasing congestion and other operational and safety issues on the existing street network. The project will provide a facility for balanced transportation including park and ride lots to support transit and vanpooling operations, as well as an expanded and enhanced pedestrian/bicycle facility. Right of way will also be reserved for possible light rail use.

**The End Result** - When completed, the North Spokane Corridor will be a 60-mile per hour, limited access highway with a direct connection to I-90 just west of the existing Thor/Freya Interchange. Other interchanges will be placed at locations such as Trent Avenue (SR 290), Wellesley Avenue, Francis / Freya Street, Parksmith Drive, US 2, and US 395 at Wandermere. This project will be developed in two major phases:

**Phase 1** - Spokane River North to establish the corridor from the River to US 395 at Wandermere.

**Phase 2** - Spokane River South to extend the corridor between I-90 and the Spokane River. Phase 2 will also include a Collector/Distributor (C/D) system (of six lanes) along I-90 between the Liberty Park and Sprague Avenue Interchanges.

## **Washington State Department of Transportation**

For a wealth of information on state-wide transportation issues go to [www.wsdot.wa.gov](http://www.wsdot.wa.gov)

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*Information compiled from cited websites by Ann Murphy, LWVSA, 2009*