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Federal grant to help ease traffic problems

\$5.7 million project will relieve traffic along I-5 corridor, Berkeley Avenue by reconfiguring the Freedom Bridge connector to Camp Murray, Tillicum

Lorin T. Smith/Northwest Guardian

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Even traffic going to Madigan and Camp Murray is horrible at times exiting the Berkeley on ramp, the City of Lakewood is doing everything possible to alleviate the congestion. Jim Bryant/NW Guardian

Traffic relief along the Interstate 5 corridor is coming for a small price tag of \$5.7 million.

The City of Lakewood recently announced that it received a Department of Defense Office of Economic Adjustment grant to alleviate congestion at the Berkeley Avenue interchange near Madigan Healthcare System.

Reconfiguring Freedom Bridge connecting JBLM to Washington National Guard's Camp Murray and Tillicum is the grant's main purpose. Madigan sees more than 1.4 million visitors each year, and more than 150,000 vehicles flow in and out of JBLM each day, with the majority using Berkeley Avenue that crosses the bridge over I-5. The improvement money couldn't have come at a better time, said City of Lakewood's Jeff Gonzalez.

"Over the next 20 years, this area is going to only get worse," he said.

This is the first major traffic improvement project on this stretch of I-5 in years. With an expected completion date in 2013, the project will add a third travel lane, reconstruct the sidewalks outside the bridge structure, add a second left-turn lane to the southbound I-5 offramp to reduce backups and improve the surrounding roads around Berkeley for greater overall access.

Drivers commuting in the morning and evening peak traffic times should notice significant time savings, estimated at up to a collective 20 hours a day.

"This project, when completed, will provide safer, smoother access to the joint base near Madigan Army Medical Center, improving access to this critical health care facility for beneficiaries while enhancing the flow of traffic in the area around the interchange," said JBLM Garrison Commander Col. Thomas Brittain.

The grant came about thanks to the hard work of the South Sound Military & Communities Partnership Steering Committee made up of business, local government and JBLM representatives. The group's mission is to find ways to reduce traffic congestion and improve safety around the South Sound I-5 corridor, and specifically, for JBLM commuters.

"I think we'll get a big bang for the buck and make a huge impact," Pierce County Executive Pat McCarthy told members of the Regional Access Mobility Partnership last week. "I think this is a fabulous effort and sets the stage for other activities."

Another grant application recently submitted is for TIGER III funding to improve public safety on I-5. Cameras, fiber optic-driven variable messaging systems and hardened driving shoulders are part of the \$34 million plan. Fiber optic cable from Thorne Lane to Mounts Road would be installed, allowing ramp meters to regulate traffic flow through the JBLM area.

Driving shoulders will be hardened, converting them into additional lanes without adding to the freeway traffic during peak times. Washington state Department of Transportation officials want to install a hardened shoulder on I-5, from the Main Gate onramp to Berkeley Avenue.

Drivers heading from Lewis Main to Madigan could potentially drive on the shoulder for the entire trip, said Ron Landon, WSDOT Olympic Region planning and program manager.

Finally, installing lots of cameras at the northbound and southbound exits can give both WSDOT traffic managers and the general public a better idea of what the I-5 traffic situation looks like through the WSDOT website. After last year's winter snowstorm, Landon said the state realized it didn't have many cameras around the JBLM area to get an accurate traffic picture.

"Cameras are critically important," Landon said, "because they let us see what's happening on the roads and we

can respond so much faster to incidents.”

While the Berkeley grant has been awarded and the TIGER III grant finds out its fate at the end of the year, JBLM servicemembers and civilians can reduce traffic right now.

All the regional transit authorities have vanpools available to serve the JBLM corridor. Currently, 44 vanpools are in service in the JBLM corridor: 25 registered with Thurston County's Intercity Transit, 16 with Pierce Transit and three with Kitsap Transit.

About 20 more have been requested through the state legislature.

Local community efforts to help JBLM, the county's single largest employer, have impressed Brittain.

“We look forward to continued cooperation with our neighbors as we confront shared challenges in our area,” he said. “Joint Base Lewis-McChord has worked very closely with local, regional and state agencies to plan improvements to transportation infrastructure around the base.”

Lorin T. Smith.: lorin.smith@nwguardian.com

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