

Traffic relief nears for corridor

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Work is progressing on a \$2 million project along Interstate 5 that the state Department of Transportation hopes will improve traffic flow between Lacey and Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

Crews have installed meters on the ramps at Nisqually and Mounts Road, and plan to install a meter at Marvin Road in a few weeks, said project engineer Dennis Engel. Seven traffic cameras between Marvin Road and JBLM should be up and running by the middle of October.

“We’re expecting to be done (with the project) the first part of November,” Engel said.

The goal of the project is twofold: control traffic entering the freeway during peak hours, and uncover a six-mile blind spot so WSDOT and commuters can react better to congestion and accidents, said Steve Kim, WSDOT Olympic Region traffic engineer.

A spokesperson for WSDOT told The News Tribune of Tacoma in July that traffic volumes through the corridor remain about the same as last year, although recent data weren’t available. From April through October 2010, the daily average traffic met or exceeded the interstate’s projected capacity at DuPont, according to WSDOT statistics.

After thousands of troops returned to the area last summer, WSDOT and Lewis-McChord took steps to reduce the congestion, including opening a new gate during morning hours and re-timing traffic signals at interchanges.

Kim said the morning commute sees congestion from about 5:30-9:30 a.m., adding that new technology could shave some time off the edges, but that core hours will see similar congestion.

WSDOT also may use the ramp meters during the afternoon rush hour, but unlike the morning commute, Kim doesn’t expect flow to get better.

Traffic cameras won’t just be used to monitor freeway conditions: Some will be used to make sure traffic isn’t backing up into local streets. If that occurs, meter operators can adjust the timing, Kim said. Cameras also will help determine meter timing.

Work completed this summer represents a short-term fix. A study released last year identified solutions such as upgrading four aging interchanges, widening I-5 and constructing a cross-base highway. The estimated cost: between \$960 million and \$1.1 billion.

Meters at Nisqually and Mounts Road aren’t yet online, and WSDOT will assess this week when to activate them.

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