



King County

Reagan Dunn

Councilmember, District 9

Metropolitan King County Council

January 16, 2026

Julie Meredith

Washington Secretary of Transportation

310 Maple Park Avenue SE

Olympia, WA 98501

Re: Request to expand general purpose use of express lanes near Ship Canal Bridge

Dear Secretary Meredith,

I am writing to express concerns over the impacts of the recent changes made to accommodate the I-5 North construction on the Ship Canal Bridge. While I understand that this project creates extreme logistical challenges, the operational changes to the express lanes to accommodate northbound traffic have unfortunately created significant congestion for southbound traffic.

These impacts to southbound I-5 traffic have created debilitating conditions for commuters as they attempt to get to their jobs, doctor appointments, the airport, as well as negatively impacting freight and delivery movement, not to mention the many other events that drive the economy of the region. With commute times from Lynnwood to Seattle more than 90 minutes at times, this is simply an untenable and unacceptable new norm for commuters.

Due to the reasons stated above, I am requesting that your department explore the option of reopening the express lanes to southbound traffic for a portion of the morning commute, as outlined in today's [Seattle Times article](#). Even if express lanes were opened to southbound only in early morning hours, there remains a real possibility that commuters may be able to more realistically change behavior and help the flow of traffic throughout the region while this critical work is completed.

I appreciate your consideration of this request and look forward to hearing back from you regarding potential solutions to lessen the congestion on southbound commuters. Thank you again for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Reagan Dunn

Vice Chairman

Metropolitan King County Council

Amid I-5 closures, Seattle-area drivers plead for express-lane relief

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By [Mike Lindblom](#)

Seattle Times transportation reporter

People who use Interstate 5 knew to expect huge slowdowns this week, when the state closed two northbound lanes of the Ship Canal Bridge for a yearlong repave.

But it turned out the worst congestion struck people driving south.

Trips from Lynnwood to Seattle immediately surpassed 90 minutes before 8 a.m. Monday — triple the usual half-hour drive — compared with only 47 minutes northbound from Tukwila to the University District, including the tight two-lane segment along the work zone.

That slowdown and others since are a result of the Washington State Department of Transportation's decision to point I-5 express lanes north 24 hours a day, to aid the flow of stymied northbound traffic. That's leaving thousands of southbounders to cram into the general lanes, rather than take their usual morning trip through the express lanes.

Many drivers, especially from Snohomish County, wonder if the state should be giving at least a few express-lane hours back to southbound motorists.

The idea deserves consideration, said Ryan Avery, deputy director for the Washington State Transportation Center at the University of Washington. For instance, running I-5 express lanes southbound until 7:30 a.m. before changing to north.

"Some people might choose to leave early, if WSDOT had a policy to open the lanes southbound," he said.

"They could definitely run a simulation on that, and I'd be really curious as to what it looks like."

Channeling public frustration, traffic reporter Chris Sullivan of KIRO 97.3 radio declared I-5 traffic ["insane in the membrane"](#) while calling for some southbound express-lane hours.

On the other hand, I-5 has been saturated for generations, and commuters already dealt with the same lane allotments during a four-week starter repave last summer.

"I think they are doing reasonably well," said Vic Bishop, legislative chair for the pro-highways Eastside Transportation Association. He said there's no way WSDOT can block two bridge lanes, in a region short on freeway space, without triggering disruptions, including Lynnwood-to-Bellevue clogs on I-405.

Mike Swires, WSDOT regional traffic engineer, predicts that as people adapt, such as by changing trip habits or using transit, delays will ease. By the end of last summer's work, the initial 60 minutes extra time from Lynnwood into Seattle subsided to 30 minutes extra, he said.

By Wednesday, the state reported slight improvement, an 82-minute trip from Lynnwood to Seattle at 8 a.m., about 10 minutes faster than Tuesday's worst. On Thursday, that trip peaked at 85 minutes at 8:30 a.m. — 45 minutes slower than usual — and the longest southbound backup reached Shoreline at North 175th Street.

"We're going to stay the course," said spokesperson RB McKeon.

No easy options

Usually, the [express lanes](#), which run from Northgate to downtown Seattle, start the day southbound, then briefly close at 11 a.m. weekdays and 1:30 p.m. weekends, so traffic can empty out, and the lanes reverse to northbound.

This new normal of all-northbound express lanes is scheduled to last all year, except a few weeks in June and July during the FIFA World Cup, when paving will pause and I-5 will function normally.

WSDOT officials seems convinced a 7:30 a.m. or similar midmorning changeover would cause confusion, which is a legitimate problem, said Avery. Long ago, the state tried to occasionally change express-lane hours for big events, which failed because it bewildered drivers.

Among other problems, that would require a culture change and education among employers and the motoring masses, to declare, in effect: “North End people, you guys wake up and hit the road early. South Enders, stay away until 8 a.m.”

Flipping a switch

WSDOT Secretary Julie Meredith, asked last week about giving the express lanes some southbound hours, said, “It’s not as easy as flipping a switch to switch them, and so we found that it operates better if we maintain a consistent system.”

Actually, the state [automated the express-lanes gates for \\$6.6 million in 2012](#), which hastened the daily changeovers from [a cumbersome 50 minutes](#), down to 15 minutes.

It’s questionable whether WSDOT could really start transitioning at 7:30 a.m. and be back in business at 7:45 a.m., because under normal conditions, the downtown express-lane exits overflow and clog the thru-lane. “It’s actually hard to change the direction. You really have to flush it out,” Avery said.

However, WSDOT’s Swires thinks express lanes could reverse within 15 minutes or thereabouts. He said it would be difficult to accurately model traffic effects, and the idea isn’t being considered.

To him, a move to deny northbound drivers the express lanes, even for a couple of hours, would risk paralyzing regional travel, and that far outweighs the nuts-and-bolts of flipping lane directions.

Years of experience show that if Sodo is allowed to clog with northbound cars, traffic there tends to stay stop-and-go along Beacon Hill all day, even in normal times. (Sodo volumes near the I-5/I-90 junction hover near 280,000 daily vehicles, even more than the 240,000 or so that cross the Ship Canal Bridge.)

“We’d see additional stress on I-5 coming up from the South End, and probably onto 405 and beyond,” Swires said.

Early data from INRIX shows that average speeds on I-5 southbound declined to 17 mph, compared with a normal 34 mph at 7 a.m. from Northgate to downtown Seattle, while I-405 showed some strain at 35 mph from Bothell to Bellevue at 8 a.m., compared with 38 mph in mid-January 2025.

Collision insurance

WSDOT says keeping the express lanes open for northbound traffic will safeguard travelers, in the event of a northbound crash near the bridge work zone.

“For example, we had one in the express lanes yesterday (Monday) afternoon, an incident with injuries that took response crews about an hour to clear,” Swires said. If that happens in nearby general lanes, while the express lanes pointed south, I-5 northbound “would be totally blocked for an extended period,” he said. That argument is sensible, Avery agrees, especially if planners consider emergency vehicles needing to go north into the U District.

A phenomenon that compounds southbound traffic this week happens at the closed express lane entrance itself, at Northgate. Drivers in the crawling general lanes see cars zip forward in the HOV lane (many illegally with solo drivers), until it ends and they cut into the other lanes — which triggers more stopping.

Could the bottleneck there be loosened, by restriping the pavement temporarily, so the HOV lane doesn’t expire there? Each lane would be channeled a few feet to the right, while a left lane continues south, and WSDOT repurposes the underused exit-only lane from Northgate Way to Northeast 85th Street. The state has often restriped freeway lanes for various reasons, notably in Fife where a new overpass junction is being built.

“That really didn’t come up on our radar,” Swires said. Such a shift might be infeasible because of “pinch points,” such as storm drains, signposts, or soft shoulders, he said. Less than 2 miles ahead, I-5 is constrained by permanent abutments near Green Lake.

Next year’s plan is for express lanes to point south 24/7, when contractors move over to the southbound Ship Canal Bridge lanes. People entering Seattle from the other side of town may scream to use them northbound in 2027.

Seattle Times transportation reporter Nicholas Deshais contributed to this report.

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