This is the background presentation for Phase 1 of the West Olympia Access Study.

The West Olympia Access Study is a partnership project between the City of Olympia and the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT). This study will evaluate current and future transportation needs on Olympia’s westside.
This is a map of the study area. It includes much of Olympia’s westside, between Capitol Lake and Eld Inlet, and between Harrison Avenue / Mud Bay and US 101. The purpose of the study is to come up with a package of strategies for improving access and circulation throughout the study area. The study is paid for jointly by Olympia and WSDOT. Randy Wesselman is project manager for Olympia and George Kovich is project manager for WSDOT.

This city-state partnership presents a unique opportunity to evaluate how the transportation system as a whole works on Olympia’s west side. Typically we look at one part of that system or the other – the city network or the state network. The West Olympia Access Study gives us a chance to look at how the local and state networks work with each other to meet mobility and circulation needs for west Olympia.
The genesis of the West Olympia Access Study was a WSDOT design study in the early 1990s for an expansion of the Crosby Blvd / Cooper Point Rd / US 101 interchange. At that time, WSDOT determined that the interchange would need to be seven lanes wide to accommodate future traffic. This exceeded the maximum five lane width necessary to maintain an appropriate community scale. Analysis suggested that the extra interchange capacity that was needed at Crosby Blvd / Cooper Point could likely be offset by modifying highway access further west. This would also help alleviate the bottleneck at the intersection of Black Lake Boulevard and Cooper Point Road, highlighted with a circle above. This alternate solution came to be known as the “Yauger Way Extension,” a concept that would modify the connections between US 101 and the local street system in the vicinity of the Black Lake Boulevard interchange. The West Olympia Access Study will provide the necessary detailed operational analysis to determine if the “Yauger Way Extension” concept is the best strategy for improving westside mobility or whether some other combination of local and state strategies should be pursued.
There are guiding policies at both the city and state level that are especially relevant to this study. This policy framework is important because it frames what we’ll think of later as feasible or reasonable options.
Olympia’s vision and Comprehensive Plan provide one part of that framework. First, the transportation system will accommodate all modes of travel safely and efficiently. This includes cars and trucks, transit, biking, and walking.

Second, connected streets provide more travel route options, regardless of travel mode, and help reduce the number of lanes needed to accommodate traffic.

Third and related to that, Olympia’s policy is that the mid-block width of major streets like Black Lake Boulevard or Cooper Point Road should be no more than five lanes – two lanes in each direction and an optional center turn lane. This helps to maintain an appropriate scale for this community.

Fourth, every effort will be made to ensure the existing system works as safely and efficiently as it can, in order to reduce the amount of road widening that is needed. This acknowledges that some congestion during peak travel times like rush hour or Christmas is to be expected in a vibrant urban area. It also underscores the importance of travel demand management programs that reduce wasted system capacity.

Fifth, the City will accommodate its share of regional growth in a compact way that lessens impacts on the transportation system and allows for more efficient delivery of all public services, not just transportation.

And last but not least, sustainability requires that today’s choices and decisions consider the impact on quality of life for future generations.
Strategic policies from the Washington Transportation Plan complement that local policy framework.

An emphasis on preservation and maintenance helps to protect investments that have already been made and keep them in sound operating condition.

State policies make traveler safety and security a primary consideration in the planning, design, construction, and operation of all transportation systems.

Mobility stresses system efficiency as a tool to maximize throughput without having to expand the existing system. It includes congestion relief measures to improve traffic flows on the state’s congested highways. And it relies on aggressive access management policies to protect operations on existing and future systems.

State policies support the economy by supporting the movement of people, goods, services, and information.

Finally, environmental health requires that the State meet its environmental responsibilities by minimizing or avoiding transportation impacts to the environment and historic resources. It also means that the State will partner with local agencies to ensure that transportation investments promote livable communities.
This is a map of the study area that will be evaluated. The red line describes the study area boundary, the yellow dotted line indicates city limits, and the unincorporated urban growth areas are outlined in black and white lines.

Most of the study area is within Olympia’s city limits. It also includes the City’s westernmost urban growth areas, a bit of rural Thurston County, and a portion of northwest Tumwater. It includes three key interchanges on US 101 – the Crosby / Cooper Point interchange, the Black Lake Boulevard interchange, and the Evergreen Parkway interchange. It also includes the I-5 / US 101 interchange and the City Center interchange on I-5. This is because the study has to evaluate the impact that any proposed change on US 101 may have on I-5 and the I-5 / US 101 interchange.

Some people have asked why we didn’t include a larger area, such as the US 101/SR 8 interchange or all of the Cooper Point peninsula. The study’s primary focus is on access and circulation issues within this boundary, especially the relationship between local and state networks in the vicinity of the highway. That said, we are not treating the study area as if it were an island. Our technical analysis includes influences from a much larger area so even though we won’t be looking at operational details throughout western Thurston County we will be factoring those impacts into the study.
This is another map of the study area, but it won’t look familiar to many people. This is an aerial photograph from 1944. 4th Avenue went over the tidal flats – there was no lake back then – and up the hill on Harrison Avenue. I-5 and US 101 did not exist at the time. Harrison Avenue and Mud Bay Road was the east-west through-corridor that people traveled when they headed to the coast. This was the start of the Old Olympic Highway. It often helps to look to our past for clues to the issues we face today. One of the key features of the 1944 transportation system was that it was built on a grid. Look at how these streets are all interconnected. It’s also interesting to note that the west side was supported by a few east-west and north-south spines that were sufficient then and which we still rely on today.
Fast forward to 2005. This is 50 years after the founding of the interstate highway system. Look at how the modern street system compares to 1944. Two things really jump out. One is just how few of the streets built in the 70’s, 80’s, and early 90’s are interconnected. Also, there is a lot more land use but not many more streets in this area than were there in 1944. The street network is only partially complete. Now that the land use is taking shape, it’s time to decide what the rest of the street network should be to serve that land use so that the area’s access and circulation needs can be met.
West Olympia is a unique study area, not just for Olympia but for the entire Thurston region. West Olympia is a regionally significant commercial and medical hub, and home to a growing population base.

There are currently 24,000 people living in west Olympia and the Cooper Point peninsula who depend on the area’s transportation system. That population is expected to increase to 36,000 people by 2030.

There are currently 17,000 jobs located on the westside. This is about one third of the City’s employment. Jobs on the west side are expected to increase to 25,000 by 2030.

Retail activities on Olympia’s west side generate 49% of the City’s retail sales tax revenue. West side businesses bring in tax revenue from throughout Thurston County and southwest Washington for the City’s general fund, which supports projects and programs throughout the westside and across the City. This is also an important source of income for Intercity Transit, which relies on sales tax for most of its operating revenues.

Capital Medical Center and the surrounding health care complex provide essential health care services for residents of Olympia and Thurston County as well as counties throughout southwest Washington. Capital Medical Center will increase in size by 30% in 2007 with the addition of a new out-patient cancer treatment facility.
Residential and commercial areas are developing as called for in the City’s adopted land use plans. Hundreds of new housing units are in the development pipeline right now, with more in the works. Thousands of square feet of new commercial space will house jobs, medical services, and commercial activities. New faith-based developments are providing not just places of worship, but schools and social services for the community. Developers are building new streets to serve the people who will move here, upgrading existing streets, and paying impact fees to widen streets where necessary. Land use and transportation go hand in hand. This study will determine what additional changes to the transportation system are needed to make travel in this growing community safe and efficient for all modes – pedestrians, bikes, transit, cars and trucks.
West side land uses are already served by local and state transportation networks. The local transportation network is currently a mix of traditional gridded streets and a few modern suburban thoroughfares. West Olympia is also served by US 101 and I-5. These are part of the National Highway System. Both are also designated as highways of statewide significance, which means that they are vital to the state’s mobility and economic interests.

The transportation system is straining to meet our travel needs because it’s not complete. Lack of street connectivity cripples access and traffic circulation on the westside and overburdens existing streets. The resulting congestion we see today causes people to think the streets need to be wider but that won’t solve problems associated with lack of connectivity. Intersections at Division and Harrison Avenue and at Kaiser Road and Harrison don’t operate efficiently under the current street pattern. And the intersection at Black Lake and Cooper Point strains during peak times to handle the simultaneous flows from two busy highway interchanges.

Despite this strain, this is an area where City plans call for more commercial and residential growth. The growth belongs here, within the urban growth area, where transportation alternatives have a chance of working. If it’s not here it is sprawling across rural Thurston County in an auto-dependent form that is going to impact city streets even more. The West Olympia Access Study will engage the community in helping to identify an appropriate mix of investments that will improve access and multi-modal circulation throughout west Olympia today and into the future.
The West Olympia Access Study will take a systems-level approach to evaluate how the study area’s arterials and highways, collectors, and local access streets work together to meet the area’s travel needs. All of these street elements play important roles. In fact, most people use all of these types of facilities to meet their daily travel needs. Arterials and highways (in blue) move the most traffic, and much of that can be non-local. Think Black Lake Boulevard or US 101. There are fewer driveways and other access points on arterials because their primary function is to move high volumes of traffic. Driveways or other access points generate turning movements that conflict with that function. At the other end of the scale we have local access streets (pale yellow). In contrast to arterials, the primary function of local streets is to provide access to individual parcels of land. Most of this traffic is generated locally. Think Milroy, or Lakemoor Drive. There are usually find lots of driveways, alleys, and other access points on these streets. Most of the City’s residential streets fall into this category. In the middle we have collectors (in orange). Collectors balance vehicle mobility with land access. The traffic they carry is generated both locally and city-wide. Think of Capital Mall Drive.
Not all of the pieces are in place yet on the westside. This puts more stress on existing facilities and makes the network susceptible to failure at its weakest points, usually at intersections or interchanges. This isn’t just a problem for drivers. It makes transit less efficient, and there are fewer direct connections for cyclists and pedestrians. The streets that are in place are overburdened. People look for alternate routes, but there aren’t many. The West Olympia Access Study will help determine what additional facilities are needed to complete the system and achieve balance between access and circulation for all modes of travel.
While much of the study has its basis in technical analysis and traditional modeling, the West Olympia Access Study is soliciting input on key issues and opportunities from the public because they are the ones who use the system to meet their transport needs. Our first public workshops generated input on problems and helped to identify key principles from which evaluation criteria will be drawn. That input will help the technical team to develop a range of options throughout the late spring and summer months for further consideration. In late September we’ll turn those options over to the public for evaluation. Their input will again be used by the technical team, this time to help refine the options and come up with a narrowed set of options that seem most feasible. At that time we’ll also define local and state roles for implementation. At roughly this time next year we expect to bring those feasible options back to the community for one additional critique to help develop a recommendation on a preferred option. At that point the Olympia City Council and the Department of Transportation will start working towards a joint decision on a preferred option that the study will recommend. We’ll then finalize the report and seek adoption by both Olympia and WSDOT on the study and its final recommendations. Once a joint decision has been reached, Olympia and WSDOT can begin the follow-up steps necessary to implement the recommendations. All told, we expect the study will take almost two years, including the time necessary for Olympia and WSDOT to reach agreement on a preferred option and endorse a final plan.
That final plan will likely include a package of strategies, both local and state, to improve access and circulation on Olympia’s westside. We need to stress that the study is likely to result in a **package** of strategies. We’re unlikely to find a silver bullet in here anywhere, one thing that will “fix” westside traffic. Instead, it’s likely to be silver buckshot – a lot of measures, both large and small, that will best meet our future needs.

The City also knows that its work doesn’t end with the study. If new street connections are recommended, more detailed design work will be necessary to ensure that they are appropriate to the context and function they’ll serve. For example, the City has older, established residential neighborhoods adjacent to regional commercial centers. More connectivity may improve circulation in these neighborhoods but only if the street design is sensitive to the unique challenges this proximity creates. Olympia knows that these are really important matters but design details are outside the scope of this study and will be pursued after it is complete.
Study Constraints

1. Land use is based on adopted plans
2. Level of detail coarser than previous studies
3. Must demonstrate need for change in US 101 access
4. Potential changes to highway access are restricted

There are just a few study constraints, but everyone can probably find at least one thing that they won’t like. First, land use, zoning, and general growth distributions are not up for reconsideration. The study is based on the adopted land use plans of Olympia, Tumwater, and Thurston County and the region’s adopted 2030 population and employment forecast. We won’t consider relocating all of the westside’s growth to Tumwater! Second, some people may find the level of detail in the West Olympia study to be coarse compared to recent City corridor studies. People who took part in the West Bay Drive, Capital Way, or Boulevard Road corridor study had an opportunity to comment on details like the location of street trees and to compare different sidewalk treatments. We will not be looking at the transportation system in that fine of a detail in the West Olympia study. This study area covers over five and a half square miles. The primary focus is system-level circulation and access. Analysis of infrastructure details at that scale is simply not feasible with this study. Third, a change in highway access – any change – is not a foregone conclusion. The study will look at how a “local only” package of reasonable projects and programs can meet local circulation and access needs. If that is not sufficient, then we’ll look at changes to the state highway system. Finally, if we do explore changes to the highway system, we will respect existing state guidance on interchange spacing. The state has strict guidance on how close access points can be – we can’t just punch new holes in the highway system any old place. The study will take this guidance into consideration since it would be irresponsible to propose a change to the highway system for the public to evaluate that would later be declared invalid by WSDOT.
The West Olympia Access Study is concerned with circulation and mobility throughout this five and a half square mile area. Every single person who participated in one of the two project workshops lives on an important street, as do the people who did not participate in a workshop. The West Olympia Access Study does not pit one street against another or one neighborhood against another. It’s taking a wholistic look at the system that serves all the transportation needs of this entire community, and we encourage everyone who participates to do the same.
“…what most benefits the community may not benefit me personally and vice versa, what benefits me personally may not benefit the community. I found that it was very hard to keep that in mind when offering my opinion.”

R.L.

Workshop #1

One of the citizens who attended the first workshop took the time to share an insight that sums up one of the huge challenges for participants in this study. He spoke of that inherent tension between what is best for an individual person versus what is best for the community as a whole. That is the background challenge the public will wrestle with as they help us explore issues and opportunities for the transportation system on Olympia’s westside and the entire community that this system serves.
Public input is important to us. During the public workshop exercises, people helped us to understand transportation problems on Olympia’s westside as they see them and experience them. Then they assessed some of the key principles we’re thinking about using to evaluate the options that will be developed over the next few months. We drew these principles from comments we’ve already received about westside traffic issues. We wanted to know if participants thought we have the right principles or if we’d missed something. The input we received will be used to shape a range of options for addressing westside access and circulation needs. It will also be used to develop criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of those options. In the fall we’ll come back and ask for the community’s help again in evaluating those options and narrowing them down to a set of feasible options to look at in more detail.
We want to hear from you. Our contact information is on this slide. Consider signing up for our project e-news. We’ll keep you posted over the spring and summer as we develop options for the community to evaluate next fall. Call us, write us, email us – we want to know what you’re thinking.

This particular Westside story hasn’t yet been written. That’s what the public is helping to do with this study. This work will shape the transportation system on Olympia’s west side for decades to come.