

## Washington Policy Center Traffic Congestion Poll

December 2007

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*This document contains results of a telephone survey among a representative sample of 500 voters in Washington State, with additional interviews conducted in King, Pierce and Snohomish Counties to complete a total of 404 in these counties. The interviews were conducted December 1-2, 2007. The potential sampling error is plus or minus 4% at the 95% confidence level for the N=500 sample and is plus or minus 5% at the 95% confidence level for the N=404 oversample.*

### **Overview**

The major reason Prop One lost in last month's election was concern about the possibility of higher taxes.

Traffic congestion is a concern throughout Washington State.

- 70% of voters statewide say traffic congestion is an “extremely” or “fairly” important issue for state government to address
- If voters in the Central Puget Sound region had been convinced that Prop One would have reduced congestion, it might have passed
- On a statewide basis, voters place a higher priority on reducing traffic congestion (51%) than funding other transportation needs (38%)

Washington voters are not impressed with state government's performance in relieving traffic congestion.

- Only 25% rate those efforts as “excellent” or “good,” while 69% rate those efforts “not so good” or “poor”

Despite concerns about traffic congestion, voters remain skeptical of a tax increase to relieve traffic congestion in their area.

- A 54% majority say they would vote for such an increase, but past history shows that tax measures that do not start out with at least 60% support end up losing at the polls
- Even so, a tax increase was more popular than paying for traffic congestion relief by reducing spending in other areas of the state's General Fund; 46% support moving funds from other areas into traffic congestion relief, while 38% oppose such transfers

Tolls were the most popular form of transportation related tax increases tested in the survey.

- Most voters (81%) would dedicate tolls for road and highway projects rather than the state's General Fund (13%)
- A majority would use tolls for new roadways (57%) rather than for existing roadways (32%)

Finally, a plurality of voters prefers fixing traffic congestion chokepoints (49%) over trying to get people out of their cars (39%).

More survey details follow.

### ***Proposition One and the Central Puget Sound Region***

In November 2007, voters in King, Pierce and Snohomish Counties rejected Prop One by a 56-44% margin. We find similar results in our poll as King, Pierce and Snohomish County respondents report voting against Prop One by a 57-43% margin (after removing respondents who did not know how they voted).

Looking at these reported results by party, when removing respondents who did not know how they voted, Republican voters were widely against Prop One (75% against, 25% for), as were Independents (63% against, 38% for), while a majority of Democrats (54%) voted for Prop One.

The major objection to Prop One was "higher taxes" (28%), followed by "too much focus on light rail" (17%) and "not enough congestion relief" (16%). Another 11% say there was "too much focus on roads". Only 3% were concerned about the "environmental impacts" of Prop One.

When asked "would you have voted for or against Prop One if you were convinced that it would have reduced congestion," opponents were divided; 48% said they would have voted against, while 44% said they would have voted for Prop One. The news here is that half of respondents who voted against Prop One say they would have considered voting for the measure *if* they had been convinced it would reduce congestion – this would have led to approval of Prop One.

On another issue, when respondents were informed that "in 1996, Sound Transit said they would roll back Sound Move taxes, the first phase of Sound Transit, if a second phase extension was rejected by voters. Prop One included this second phase extension and voters rejected it," 50% said Sound Transit should reduce tax rates as promised and 30% say Sound Transit should continue with their current tax rates. The remaining 20% have no opinion.

### ***Statewide Traffic Congestion Overview***

Fully 70% of respondents rate reducing traffic congestion as either "extremely" (32%) or "fairly" (38%) important. There is consensus agreement on this issue among Republicans, Democrats and Independents alike, and unsurprisingly, this sentiment is higher in Western parts of the state than in the East.

When looking at spending transportation tax dollars and state government priorities in a general manner, respondents place a higher priority on "reducing traffic congestion" (51%) over funding "other transportation needs" (38%). The remaining 11% have no opinion.

Western Washington residents outside of Seattle and Republicans are among the most likely to place a higher priority on reducing traffic congestion (55% and 62% reduce traffic congestion, respectively), while a plurality of Seattle residents place a higher priority on funding "other transportation needs."

Washington voters are not impressed with state government's performance on relieving traffic congestion. Indeed, nearly seven-in-ten voters (69%) rate the government's performance as "not so good" (40%) or "poor" (29%) on this measure, while just 25% say performance is "excellent" (1%) or "good" (24%).

### ***Tax Increase?***

Importantly, a majority of voters (54%) would vote for a "major tax increase" if convinced the plan would actually reduce traffic congestion. Another 37% would vote against such an increase and 9% have no opinion. Fully 70% of Seattle residents would support such an increase, and a majority of Western Washington residents outside of Seattle are also supportive. However, fully 60% of Eastern Washington residents would oppose the increase. Looking at party, 65% of Democrats are supportive, while both Republicans and Independents are divided.

It is important to note that ballot measure consultants suggest measures that raise taxes must garner 60% support in initial polling in order to be considered viable on Election Day. As a result, passage of a tax increase to reduce traffic congestion in Washington is no sure thing.

If voters were convinced that a tax increase could actually reduce traffic congestion, tolls would be the most popular of five tax increases tested. Indeed, 27% prefer "tolls," followed by "gas tax" (16%), "automobile sales tax" (16%), "vehicle license fees" (13%) and a "sales tax" (9%). Another 12% prefer none of the five options and 6% have no opinion. However, while 27% of voters say they would be most supportive of tolls over the other options presented in the survey, this does not translate into actual support of a tax increase. Looking at subgroup reactions, tolls are the leading increase outside of Seattle, among voters age 35 and older, more frequent voters (2-4/4 and 3-4/4), Republicans and Independents. Seattle residents and Democrats are equally supportive of both tolls and a gas tax, while younger voters (18-34) and infrequent voters (0-1/4) are among the most supportive of an automobile sales tax and vehicle license fees.

Still, a tax increase was more popular than transferring money from other state programs into traffic congestion relief. A narrow plurality of voters (46%) support reduced spending in "other areas of the state's General Fund" in order to place more money into traffic congestion relief projects, while 38% oppose and 17% have no opinion. Residents in Seattle are divided, while voters residing elsewhere in the state narrowly lean toward supporting reduced spending. Voters age 45-64 are divided today, while voters age 18-44 and 65 and older are supportive. Less frequent voters (0-1/4) are more supportive than better voters (2-4/4), who are divided. By party, a majority of Republicans and half of Independents are supportive of reduced spending, but a plurality of Democrats are opposed.

### ***Tolls***

When it comes to the potential use of bridge and highway toll revenues, voters want the money used only for road and highway projects (81%), as opposed to placing the revenue into the state's General Fund (13%). Further, 57% favor the potential tolls charged on new roadways only, rather than existing roadways (32%).

### **Message Testing**

Looking further at the state government's focus on transportation, a plurality of voters (49%) agree with the following statement:

*"Mr. Jones believes state government should focus on fixing traffic congestion chokepoints. Congestion relief will help commuters get to work, help businesses move their products and help the environment because shorter commutes mean less air pollution."*

And another 39% agree with this opposing view:

*"Mr. Smith believes state government should try to get people out of their cars and that we need to focus tax dollars on public transportation, not building more highways. He says trying to fix traffic congestion with road improvements will result in more people driving more cars, more damage to the environment and more congestion."*

Among those with strong opinions, respondents who "strongly" agree with Smith/get people out of cars (26%) are numerically higher than those who "strongly agree" with Jones/fix chokepoints (22%).

Not surprisingly, a majority of Seattle residents agree with Smith/get people out of cars and a majority of residents elsewhere in the state agree with Jones/fix chokepoints. A majority of men agree with Jones/fix chokepoints, while women are divided. By age, voters age 18-34 and 65 and older agree with Jones/fix chokepoints, while voters age 35-64 are divided. By party, a majority of both Republicans and Independents agree with Jones/fix chokepoints, while a majority of Democrats agree with Smith/get people out of cars.