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# Roads and transit, post-Prop. 1: Where do we go from here?

November 7, 2007

Mike Lindblom, Seattle Times

Nov. 7--Only a half-day has passed since the polls closed, but transportation advocates are already gearing up to determine what's next after Tuesday night's rejection of "Roads & Transit" Proposition 1.

Talks are likely to start soon about how to cobble together a funding plan to replace Highway 520, said Metropolitan King County Executive Ron Sims.

"We still have to find a solution for the 520 bridge. That's going to be imperative," he said at the Sierra Club's anti-roads victory party, at a Capitol Hill pizza parlor. Gov. Christine Gregoire, a Proposition 1 supporter, will gather other leaders for discussions of the bridge and other regional needs, he said. "The governor will set the pace."

Today Gregoire issued a statement listing some of the challenges, including the 520 bridge. She said she would work to find solutions.

"This was a tough vote. Local voters were asked to make a significant contribution to solving safety and congestion and I respect the decision of the voters in the Puget Sound area," Gregoire said. "Congestion and safety remains a very real problem. I will continue to fight to solve our transportation problems. Safety must be our number one priority and the 520 bridge, a critical link in our transportation system, is one of the top regional safety issues. It is vulnerable to earthquakes and winds and it must be replaced.

"We have about a \$2 billion shortfall that needs to be solved. I have directed OFM [Office of Financial Management] and WSDOT [the state Department of Transportation] to work with both public and private entities to develop a full finance plan for the 520."

A few weeks ago, the conventional wisdom was that state officials would punt in 2008, and wait until after next year's election to stick their necks out on transportation.

But former state Sen. Jim Horn, a highway supporter, thinks the opposite will happen.

"If Gregoire wants to get re-elected, she's going to have to do something. If she doesn't, that's going to be the number-one issue in the Rossi-Gregoire campaign," Horn said. Dino Rossi is the Republican challenger to Gregoire, a Democrat.

The shape of any follow-up ballot measures is unknown.

Sound Transit CEO Joni Earl said she can't predict whether the agency will go back to the ballot in 2008, or how officials might change the transit offerings. Legally, Sound

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Transit can now go to voters without a roads package attached.

In the next two to three weeks, the agency will study final vote counts, and where there were pockets of support and resistance, as well as conduct surveys and interviews with "stakeholders," she said.

"We're committed to the fact we've got to do something about traffic and congestion in the region. It was still there when I got up this morning and rode to town on the commuter train," said Earl, who often takes the Sounder line from Tacoma to King Street Station.

Another possibility is to wait until late 2009 when the first 16 miles of light rail start running from downtown Seattle to the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, and hope that the operating line builds more political support.

Earlier this year, a commission led by former Seattle Mayor Norm Rice and businessman John Stanton suggested a super-commission be created, to take over the powers of Sound Transit and other agencies to make transportation and land-use policies. The report has gathered dust, but might possibly get a new life.

The state Legislature required roads and transit to go on the ballot together, in an attempt to prevent skirmishes between highway fans and pro-transit environmentalists. Instead, rail opponent Kemper Freeman called road opponent Mike O'Brien, of the Sierra Club, "my new best friend" in a campaign debate, as both opposed the measure.

Now, the anti-Proposition 1 coalition could fracture. Opposition leaders toasted their victory with whiskey this morning in Freeman's Bellevue office, and discussed what to do next.

Former state Rep. Will Knedlik said his group wants to work with all opponents of Proposition 1 -- including the Sierra Club -- to bring a new package to voters. Opposition leaders said Sound Transit shouldn't go back to voters until the projects promised in 1996, including light rail to the University of Washington, are completed in the late 2010s.

Sound Transit proposed 50 miles of new light rail, worth about \$10 billion in current dollars, as the biggest piece of Proposition 1, which also included 186 miles of road expansions.

Earl emphasized that construction is 80 percent complete on the first light-rail line from Westlake Center to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, to open in late 2009. That job will continue, and there is plenty of work to do, she said.

O'Brien, of the Sierra Club, said that as he phoned voters over the weekend, he promised each of them that his group would come back with a strong alternative, heavy on transit.

The defeat is an apparent boost for "congestion pricing" -- the use of pervasive tolling that varies with traffic, to discourage so-called nonessential trips. It would also raise money where taxes are lacking.

It might also be an issue where greens and some highway backers can agree, though many citizens, already paying gas taxes, would resent a fee on existing highways.

The state Department of Transportation, working with Sims and King County Metro Transit, has already been offered a federal grant to start tolling the aging 520 bridge, but that doesn't mean tolls will necessarily be enacted.

Sims wouldn't discuss tolling options last night, except to say Gregoire would take the lead.

State legislators, such as Senate Transportation Committee chair Mary Margaret Haugen, D-Camano Island, have been hesitant to support more tolling, but say that's going to be a top discussion item in early 2008.

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