

Opinion

# Get I-405 flowing: Complete 16-year-old master plan now

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A typical morning commute south of the Bothell-Everett Highway on Interstate 405. (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times, 2017)

**Finishing the I-405 master plan would provide shorter and safer trips for car drivers, transit riders and freight deliveries, accommodating the Eastside’s remarkable growth.**

By [Victor H. Bishop](#) and [Todd R. Woosley](#)

*Special to The Times*

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Last week, The Seattle Times asked, “[I-405 nightmares: Can they be fixed with \\$3 billion in toll lanes, interchanges, bus rapid transit?](#)” The answer is a qualified “yes.” The addition of two new lanes between Bellevue and Renton, along with other capacity improvements, will significantly reduce congestion even as more people use Interstate 405.

For example, the Washington State Department of Transportation forecasts congestion between Bellevue and Renton will largely go away (except at the Interstate 90 interchange) when the new lanes open in 2024. However, this won’t last long as more people use the freeway. Therefore, much more is needed to finish the state’s [I-405 master plan](#) and provide a more permanent fix to the freeway’s notorious gridlock.

Finishing the plan, should be the focus of our elected officials, business community and other impacted citizens.

Why? Years of analyses on the best way to handle traffic resulting from a growing Eastside culminated in the federally approved I-405 Master Plan Record of Decision in 2002. The plan is to significantly reduce congestion on I-405 with capacity improvements, including seven transit interchanges, five freeway-to-freeway interchanges and two general-purpose lanes in each direction, all to be built and finished by 2020. The plan also calls for more van pools, adding park-and-ride spaces and implementing a bus rapid transit system.

Work began in 2003, when the Legislature raised the fuel tax to pay for new lane segments in each direction on I-405. In 2005, another gas-tax increase funded further capacity improvements. Travelers saw immediate benefits — speeds doubled to 45 mph through Kirkland. Drivers were happy with the improvements — until lawmakers decided to toll the new lanes.

The tolls, which were not part of the original plan, have been controversial. For one, state law requires the toll lanes to revert to the regular lanes promised if they don't operate at 45 mph 90 percent of the time — a target they are not meeting. Since these lanes were fully funded by

gas taxes and aren't meeting their speed target, the nonprofit Eastside Transportation Association recommends the toll lanes should go back to a regular lane and an HOV 2+ lane configuration in each direction. Additionally, the association recommends the state Department of Transportation introduces strategic-capacity improvements to keep buses and carpools moving.

Tolls aside, building out I-405 has been slow in the making. The Department of Transportation reports that only 45 percent of new-lane capacity, half of arterial improvements, and just 19 percent of interchanges and transit ramps are completed or funded. In short, the Eastside is further and further away from meeting the 2020 deadline.

Finishing the plan would provide faster and safer trips for car drivers, transit riders and freight deliveries, accommodating the Eastside's remarkable growth. That's why the Bellevue City Council's priorities include urging lawmakers to "accelerate the I-405 Corridor Program." And they aren't alone.

The Eastside Transportation Partnership, representing 17 Eastside cities, King County and other agencies, agreed that fully funding the remaining improvements in the I-405 plan is its top legislative priority.

It's also supported by the business community. The East King County Chambers of Commerce Legislative Coalition "urge the Legislature to authorize additional funding, beyond current law levels, to complete implementation of the adopted I-405 Master Plan."

In short, the \$3 billion plan for proposed improvements increasing I-405's capacity will make traffic flow better, but truly fixing I-405 will require more money and political will. Population and employment continue to grow on the Eastside at a rapid pace — and the best way to accommodate this is by completing the I-405 master plan in place since 2002.

**Victor H. Bishop** is chair of the Eastside Transportation Association, a nonprofit group dedicated to relieving traffic congestion in the Puget Sound region. He is a licensed transportation engineer with 56 years of professional traffic-engineering experience.

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