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We're stuck with nation's worst road funding gap

\$800-per-person shortfall twice as bad as other areas

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The Seattle-Puget Sound area has the largest gap between transportation infrastructure needs and secured funding of any metropolitan area in the country, according to a study.

The shortfall amounts to nearly \$800 per person in the four-county area around Puget Sound -- King, Pierce, Snohomish and Kitsap counties, according to Infrastructure 2008, a report released Wednesday by the Urban Land Institute.

The report, dubbed a wake-up call for politicians, planners and taxpayers, compared the transportation infrastructure and funding of 23 cities worldwide.

American cities are falling behind Asia and Europe in investing in roads, transit, bridges and other systems needed for growing populations, the study said.

Among U.S. cities/metro areas studied, the Seattle-Puget Sound area's infrastructure-funding gap was nearly twice that of Dallas-Fort Worth, which was second at nearly \$400 per capita. ULI, a nonprofit education and research institute that focuses on land-use, population growth, urban planning and the environment, worked with financial consultants Ernst & Young to produce the 60-page study.

"By 2040, the population of the Seattle area is projected to grow by 1.7 million new people, with 1.2 million new jobs ... that's like dropping the population of greater metropolitan Portland into the Puget Sound area," John Hempelmann, co-vice chairman of the Reality Check Task Force for ULI Seattle, said Wednesday.

"That's a big number, and a huge challenge, given the lack of infrastructure capacity and lack of funding."

Speakers at an event Wednesday to release the report attributed the gap to converging factors, including diminished federal funding, failed regional transportation measures, and a regressive tax system overly reliant on sales and gas taxes.

The result is traffic congestion and aging infrastructure, such as the Evergreen Point Bridge, the Alaskan Way Viaduct, regional freeways, local streets and other bridges, that need to be fixed or replaced.

While work on Sound Transit's light rail system between downtown Seattle and Sea-Tac Airport and from downtown to the University of Washington is progressing well, the agency now is seeking input from voters on a future bond issue to fund extensions north and east across Lake Washington.

The Puget Sound Regional Council, which provided data for the report, has planned for higher density, including rail and bus rapid transit.

But "the report shows we have this history of laying out our plans and not being able to carry through, in part because the voters aren't thinking long term," said Charles Howard, the council's transportation planning director.

Greg Johnson, chairman of ULI Seattle and president of Wright Runstad & Co., said "the report tells us we need to come up with financeable solutions sooner rather than later ... and get going on our infrastructure."

Keynote speaker William Hudnut, a ULI senior fellow, called for a greater federal role in building and funding infrastructure, public-private partnerships, more regional cooperation and citizen responsibility to bridge the gaps.

"It's kind of discouraging," he told the audience, that in 1960, the U.S. spent 12 percent of its gross domestic product on infrastructure and now spends 2.4 percent. Japan spends 10 percent, China 9 percent and India 4.6 percent, Hudnut said.

Earlier this year, he said, a bipartisan congressional commission estimated the U.S. needs to spend at least \$225 billion annually on transportation systems alone "just to catch up and keep pace with the rest of the world."

It shows in Americans' daily lives. Europeans are connecting major cities using high-speed trains traveling 200 mph, Hudnut said.

But Seattle-area drivers spent about 45 hours in traffic delays in 2005 -- more than a week of vacation -- in contrast to 12 hours in 1982, according to the report.

Some are hoping for a reauthorization of the depleted federal Highway Trust Fund in November 2009, but with a shifted focus from cars to transit.

"We don't know how it's going to shake out, but the hope is that people will start talking more at the local and national levels about infrastructure needs," said Carl Koelbel, research associated with the ULI in Washington, D.C.

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