

International Mobility & Trade Corridor Project

Steering Committee Meeting Summary

Thursday, July 16, 2009

Meeting packet available online at: <http://resources.wcog.org/border/7-16-09scp.pdf>

Meeting Location

The meeting was held at Homestead Farms Golf Resort in Lynden, Washington.

Meeting Attendance

B.C. Ministry of Transportation (Abid Sivic); **City of Blaine, WA** (Stephen Banham); **City of Lynden, WA** (Duane Huskey); **Pacific Corridor Enterprise Council** (Jim Kohnke); **Township of Langley, BC** (Paul Cordeiro); **Transport Canada** (Jim Wang, Jessica Yen); **U.S. Congressman Rick Larsen** (Cherie Little); **U.S. Customs & Border Protection** (Lynn Gardner, James Rector); **U.S. Federal Highway Administration** (Sid Stecker); **Washington State Department of Transportation** (Todd Carlson); **Western Washington University** (Anneliese Vance); **Whatcom Council of Governments** (Hugh Conroy, Melissa Miller)

Current event updates

James Rector reported that the southbound commercial lane at the Lynden port-of-entry will re-open tomorrow (Friday). U.S. General Services Administration (GSA) will complete installation of a new two-level inspection booth in the commercial lane.

James Rector added that the new additional booth at Lynden, and the one being installed at the Sumas port-of-entry will be open at the end of the month, just in time for the August World Police Games.

Hugh Conroy reviewed the updates discussed in last month's IMTC memo.

Hugh Conroy told the group that there are two academic research efforts underway where organizers are interested in feedback from IMTC participants. The first, being conducted by Professor Patrick Buckley of Western Washington University, is looking at IMTC as an example of cross-border collaboration. The second is part of the research conducted by visiting professor Victor Konrad through the Border Policy Research Institute (BPRI) at Western Washington University, and is a fifteen minute survey. An email will be distributed to IMTC participants on his behalf.

Jim Wang reported that the Deputy Minister for Transport Canada has been replaced. Mrs. Yaprak Baltacıoğlu was previously Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Agri Food Canada, and will be taking over the new position July 1.

Duane Huskey invited participants to attend the Raspberry Festival in the City of Lynden this weekend. The event will be held downtown.

Abid Sivic summarized progress to date on regional Gateway Program projects, including the Highway 7 river bridge which will be completed this year, and the new Port Mann Bridge. Initial plans are underway, with the goal of having it open by 2013. The new bridge and project will widen Trans

Canada Highway 1 to ten lanes, including a ten lane bridge crossing the river. This may affect traffic heading across the border down B.C. Highway 15.

Abid Sivic reported that the Golden Ears bridge is finished and open to traffic. It was initially toll-free so people could try out the new route, but tolls went into effect today. This provides a new route between Trans Canada Highway 1 and B.C. Highway 7.

Paul Cordeiro added that the tolls are \$3. 37,000 cars used the bridge each day the first week it opened. Now that tolls are in effect they are expecting 15,000 – 20,000 cars per day.

Stephen Banham announced that Blaine's stimulus funding project to connect Boblett Street east to the industrial zone of the city is opening to bids next week. Construction should begin early August.

Stephen Banham reported that Blaine is moving on designs for H Street improvements, with the hope of going to construction early next year.

Stephen Banham updated the committee on the Exit 274 interchange justification report, which has been submitted to FHWA and received comments back. The city is responding and the report should be completed soon.

Annaliese Vance informed the group that she continues research on her survey of how businesses are impacted by border regulations.

Todd Carlson reported that Tony Hernandez of WA State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and Brad Valentine of Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) walked the State Route 543 approach to the northbound Pacific Highway port-of-entry to discuss signing and striping changes to best reduce traffic conflicts, especially amongst NEXUS and duty free travelers. One concern is the location of the NEXUS and duty free sign, which is actually north of the turn into the duty free and may confuse approaching drivers.

Sid Stecker announced that U.S. Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) approved the work programs for all the state Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) including Whatcom Council of Governments (WCOG), and also approved the State Planning & research Program funding. He noted that due to state procedures and policies, Washington State met requirements seamlessly.

Sid Stecker commented that the new Administrator and Assistant Administrator for WA State's FHWA office are both from border states (Arizona and Maine) and will hopefully be sympathetic to unique border transportation needs.

Sid Stecker reminded the group that there are Transportation Research Board (TRB) summer sessions taking place next week, including one in Seattle.

Melissa Miller noted the North American Freight Flows Conference information and schedule that is included in the meeting packet. This TRB meeting will be held September 16-17 in Irvine, California.

Lynden/Aldergrove Port-of-Entry overview

Hugh Conroy presented an overview of data regarding the Lynden/Aldergrove border crossing and transportation systems. The presentation is available on the IMTC website at:

www.wcog.org/border/7-16-09scpres.pdf.

2009 Commercial Vehicle Operations Survey update

Melissa Miller reviewed some summary statistics from the ongoing 2009 Commercial Vehicle Operations Survey being completed by the Border Policy Research Institute (BPRI) at Western Washington University and WCOG. The summary is available in the meeting packet.

Hugh Conroy reviewed the additional component of the study which will include surveying southbound travelers at the Lynden/Aldergrove and Sumas/Huntingdon ports-of-entry about the feasibility of NEXUS lanes at those crossings. The questions to be asked are included in the meeting packet.

He also noted that additional components include a signage inventory, an evaluation of the effectiveness of the Greening the Border initiative at Peace Arch, and additional data gathering such as booth processing time control counts (since surveying may have impacted booth processing time).

Hugh Conroy reviewed pictures of the survey effort to date.

Todd Carlson noted that the survey of the potential for NEXUS at Lynden/Aldergrove will be useful in future cost-benefit analyses done by WSDOT to justify any improvements to State Route 539 north of Badger Road, especially if the improvements include a NEXUS lane.

Stephen Banham asked about lengthy waits in the NEXUS lane (over 20 minutes) and if this is common. James Rector said that the 20 minute wait was an anomaly, perhaps a result of special operations in that lane. For most of the time it takes 15-20 seconds to clear a NEXUS car, versus 50+ seconds to clear a regular primary lane vehicle.

Stephen Banham asked if people cross the border more frequently once they have a NEXUS card. James Rector responded that this data is not available.

Cherie Little asked about privacy concerns regarding surveying efforts such as the CVO study. Hugh Conroy replied that all the student employees took a human subjects review class and received certification per Western Washington University requirements. Respondents are informed that their participation is voluntary and anonymous.

U.S. TIGER grant program

Hugh Conroy reviewed a draft outline for applying to the TIGER grant program. This program is part of the American Recovery & Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which will provide \$1.5 billion (USD) in discretionary grants. The Federal Register announced the program in June. The deadline for the application is September 15.

WCOG is developing a grant request that will be based largely on WSDOT's recently successful application to USDOT's Transportation Border Congestion Relief (TBCR) Program. The list of projects for the application is not finalized but will include continuation of the IMTC project as well as system improvements to regional Advanced Traveler Information Systems (ATIS). The TBCR program also assured successful proponents that USDOT would assist them in connecting with future discretionary funding.

The TIGER grant funding is available to DOTs and MPOs. Originally funding was limited to projects of \$20 million or more, but that has been changed.

In addition to the TIGER grant, there are other funding opportunities that WCOG is looking into, including reauthorization of the U.S. transportation act, high priority projects, and the extension of the current transportation act at prior funding levels, which are allocated based on a formula and

would result in Coordinated Border Infrastructure funds coming to Washington State. WCOG will work with WSDOT and the state legislature to see if some of this funding can be used for IMTC projects.

Cross-border rail

Jim Kohnke passed along the news that CBSA has decided to waive inspection fees on the second Amtrak train between Seattle and Vancouver for a trial period, beginning August 1 and continuing through the 2010 Winter Olympic Games. The fee status will be assessed once more after the conclusion of the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

James Rector reported that U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP) received the announcement of the start of new service yesterday. They are now scrambling to find approval for additional staff.

James Rector mentioned that CBP has been meeting with Amtrak on and off for the last few months regarding the issue of the facilities at the Vancouver train station and how to improve those facilities for inspections.

Hugh Conroy asked if the improvements were the same as the ones that were requested for funding a few years back as part of the list of IMTC projects. James Rector said he wasn't sure.

Steve Banham noted that it appears the construction of siding at the Swift rail inspection facility is nearing completion. The siding will allow freight trains that are being inspected to stay off the main line.

Peace Arch outbound inspection signal lights

Todd Carlson overviewed designs of outbound inspection signalization on I-5 at the new Peace Arch inspection facility which would improve safety for CBP's sporadic outbound inspections. WSDOT has conferred with GSA on the design requirements for the signal to make sure it abides by state design standards.

James Rector commented that the signals are for officer safety. While performing outbound inspections on highways, officers have been injured. The goal is to stop traffic and quickly talk to vehicle drivers.

Stephen Banham asked if the presence of the lights will make outbound inspections a permanent inspection process. James Rector replied it will continue to be sporadic, and can occur at any time. It can last five minutes or many hours. It may be intelligence-driven or random.

A pull-out area for inspecting outbound vehicles is also in the design (see presentation online).

Todd Carlson commented that initially the hope was these lights could be part of a future northbound "greening of the border" initiative similar to what is in place southbound. Governor Gregoire and B.C. Premier Campbell signed an agreement to that affect. However the location of the signal is too far south to effectively be part of an anti-idling zone. Now WSDOT is simply reviewing the consultant's designs.

Hugh Conroy noted that, southbound, the signals that are part of the Greening of the Border are preceded by speed bumps, curves in the road, and signs. Drivers are already slowed. But this will be off of the interstate, where there are no speed bumps or other traffic calming elements to slow traffic. Could this push back a queue end that would be in danger of collision of the rest of the Interstate-5 travelers?

Stephen Banham expressed concern that backing up the traffic will impact on and off-ramps to the interstate, which will greatly affect the movement of traffic in the city during high-volume periods.

James Rector said he cannot see it impacting Blaine traffic. It is further north than where outbound inspections are being conducted now.

Stephen Banham responded that it is only a difference of 200 feet. If more are conducted, regardless of volume, it will impact traffic safety if there are backups and cause a problem for local access.

Lyn Gardner replied that CBP watches the lineups closely and won't let backups of that magnitude happen.

James Rector added that the signals may be left yellow flashing or green rather than dark.

Stephen Banham responded that this will have a traffic calming effect.

Paul Cordeiro noted that there are problems with having a light signal that's dark most of the day and then suddenly green or red – people stop paying attention to it. That's why they have installed amber flashing lights prior to the signal to warn traffic that the light signal ahead is changed. Abid Sivic added that leaving it dark may burn out the mechanism sooner.

Todd Carlson agreed that yellow flashing lights seemed appropriate. A posted speed of 20 mph would be appropriate, too.

Topic focus: Lynden/Aldergrove

State Route 539 (Guide Meridian) overview

Todd Carlson reviewed improvements to SR 539 and the new roundabouts along the route. He noted the section of widening that has yet to be funded. The project will require approximately \$60 million (USD) to be completed to the border (approximately 5 miles).

Issues that may weigh in to a cost-benefit analysis of completing the widening to the border include possible expansion of the Lynden/Aldergrove facility to 24-hour operations, the possible closure to commercial vehicles, the addition of a NEXUS lane, and other factors. Any savings to society that can be factored in in terms of the respective value to shippers and carriers could also help make the case for the funding, especially any estimates of travel times savings for commercial traffic.

To date most of the responses to the new roundabout at Ten Mile Road have been favorable. There are new design features in the roundabout including soft curbs for trucks.

Jim Kohnke commented that SR 539 is the most direct route to the border other than I-5, as compared to Sumas/Huntingdon, which is 12 miles out of the way.

Cherie Little asked about possible improvements to the interchange between I-5 and SR 539 in Bellingham. Todd Carlson responded that it will cost approximately \$200 million to fix that interchange and that portion of SR 539 is very hard to improve given the amount of access points and turning through that corridor. To study that interchange, WSDOT had to also study the surrounding interchanges since they are so close, and that is what prompted the I-5 Master Plan through Bellingham.

Paul Cordeiro noted that B.C. Ministry of Transportation (MOT) did a study of B.C. Highway 13 and a truck climbing lane 4-5 years ago. They concluded that eventually the highway will need to be

widened to four lanes up to Trans Canada Highway 1, although there was no timeline established with the project.

Stephen Banham commented that it would be better to encourage freight on the interstate and not on this route, given the interchange with I-5.

Southbound ATIS expansion to Lynden/Aldergrove and Sumas/Huntingdon ports-of-entry

Abid Sivic updated the committee on progress to date to expand MOT's border delay ATIS system to include the Lynden and Sumas ports-of-entry. The system will be designed along the same lines and using the same software as the current system in place at the Peace Arch and Pacific Highway ports-of-entry.

The design is underway and the first phase will include installation of hardware, and transmission of information to the website, the archive system, and to text message and voice message systems. Highway Advisory Radio (HAR) will also be added. The only element not included in the first phase will be additional variable message signs (VMS) given their high cost (\$400,000). The existing system updates wait times every two minutes.

There is no firm cost estimate, but they are assuming around \$700,000 (CAD) for Phase I. This covers the additional vehicle detection systems needed. Web cameras are already in place.

Stephen Banham asked if they have considered hybrid signs instead of full VMS, where only the delay time changes. Abid Sivic responded that they did initially look at this, but when the Province found additional funding they originally opted for a full VMS because of the additional benefits of using the sign for amber alerts and traffic accidents. However for Phase II of this project they may look at other sign options like hybrids.

Construction is expected to take six months.

Stephen Banham asked about the effectiveness of a system where the wait time can change so dramatically between a sign on the highway and the actual port. Abid Sivic replied that the sign can only show the wait at the time the person reads the sign, but new technology such as text messaging, web-viewing phone services, HAR, and a voice response system will allow people to get updates as they wait.

Todd Carlson added that WSDOT has a twitter account it uses for constant updates, but once a person makes a choice, they generally stick with that border crossing choice even if the situation changes.

Todd Carlson recalled a recent error in the signage which informed travelers that there was a short wait at Sumas/Huntingdon, when in fact it was two hours long. This problem has been corrected.

Sid Stecker suggested adding in the travel time between the highway and the port of entry to the total time on signage (i.e. add 30 minutes to the border delay to account for travel to the border).

Hugh Conroy asked about the situation where cars are being cleared through commercial vehicle lanes at southbound Pacific Highway, and how that is affecting the southbound ATIS wait time system. Abid Sivic responded that it does impact the accuracy but the system can still function, as it will see that the cars are being cleared at a faster rate and incorporate that into the total. What is needed for long-term fixing of this would be a vehicle classification detector in the lane to turn "off" the lane as part of the system when trucks are using it, and turn it "on" when it is used for cars.

Melissa Miller noted that this will be an issue at Lynden/Aldergrove southbound, as CBP is installing a two-level inspection booth specifically to inspect both cars and trucks through the lane depending on need. As part of the system design for the southbound ATIS system at that port, this problem may be resolved and the solution later expanded to Pacific Highway.

Hugh Conroy mentioned the national Border Wait Time initiative and team that is looking to invest in pilot projects across the border that will showcase ways to collect border wait times. This team may also be able to address emerging issues of dynamic lane types (i.e. flexible NEXUS lanes, commercial and passenger vehicle lanes, etc.).

Abid Sivic commented that, overall, MOT is satisfied with the efficacy of the system. Any time the data are questionable, they do not display anything so that no misinformation is broadcast.

Stephen Banham added that one benefit of showing all four crossing times is the advertisement to travelers that there ARE four options for crossing the border in the region.

Duane Huskey asked why Lynden/Aldergrove is open 8:00am to midnight only. It would be far more effective and beneficial for regular business travelers to be open an hour or two earlier so travelers can be at their destination at the beginning of the work day.

Paul Cordeiro agreed that a 6:00am opening time would serve a large number of cross-border commuters, even if it meant closing the port an hour or two earlier.

Hugh Conroy theorized that the 8:00am start time corresponded with a shift change for CBP, but he wasn't sure why 8:00am was chosen. He added that there are regional advocates for opening the port 24 hours, but smaller changes to open hours would be worth checking into. Current volumes don't seem to support 24 hour operations.

0 Avenue/B.C. Highway 13 traffic controls

Paul Cordeiro described the Township of Langley's efforts to improve safety and reduce conflicts at the intersection where 0 Avenue crosses B.C. Highway 13 at the border. Conflicts arise when people use 0 Avenue as a short cut for the border to bypass lengthy queues, and when travelers try to cross the congested area to continue on 0 Avenue by going into the oncoming lane of traffic.

Langley installed signage prohibiting turning south from 0 Avenue to the border. They also added 8-9 guide signs approaching the road telling travelers they no longer have access to the U.S. crossing from 0 Avenue.

Paul Cordeiro mentioned that there may be opportunities associated with port changes that would improve the intersection. The region's MP has interest in expanding southbound capacity, including adding a truck lane and/or a southbound NEXUS lane. One option may be to close that section of 0 Avenue completely and making that a new approach to the U.S. port for NEXUS cars. Improvements could also be planned with WSDOT relative to SR 539 upgrades under consideration.

Currently that section of 0 Avenue gets 1,500 cars a day, and has only one access point. Closing it would eliminate the ability to connect to the east side of 0 Avenue. The closest alternative road connecting the east and west of B.C. Highway 13 would be 16th Avenue which is two miles north.

Paul Cordeiro noted that, even though 0 Avenue makes a large horseshoe-shaped reroute around the port-of-entry, the bicycle and pedestrian trail goes directly along the border, adding to confusion in the area.

New O Avenue signage has made improvements but the underlying issue is still there and will require a more radical area change to fully address the problems.

Jim Kohnke asked if any consideration has been given to building a joint facility at Lynden/Aldergrove. Hugh Conroy responded that joint facilities have been built (Oroville-Osoyoos, Coutts-Sweetgrass). Those projects were constructed so that two separate building projects (one U.S., one Canadian) connect at the border itself. These projects were very challenging. The broader endorsement of joint-facilities (in past bilateral memoranda like the Shared Border Accord and Smart Border Declaration) would seem more feasibly pursued in the context of U.S.-Canada discussions about pre-clearance zones. If our two countries can define terms under which each agency can carry out its border-crossing inspections within a defined border zone (accord-zone, plaza, etc.), there would seem to be much greater leeway for designing the best facility for a given location. The pre-clearance discussions were last underway regarding the Fort Erie bridge crossing. There have been indications that there is interest in reopening these discussions.

Jim Kohnke mentioned a couple of factors that might contribute to increased feasibility of a joint facility – that CBSA officers are now armed (changing the gun issue that had come up in the past) and that there is likely federal funding available for further investigating joint facilities.

Hugh Conroy said he would follow up with CBSA regarding the current stage of planning for a replacement Aldergrove facility. This could be a topic for the September IMTC Core Group meeting – especially in conjunction with other improvements under consideration – roadway improvements, level of service for commercial vehicles, etc.

Hugh Conroy adjourned the meeting at 1:15pm.