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Seattle still car-centric, panelists say

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So you're an alternative-transportation advocate asked at a public forum mostly full of like-minded people what you think of the tunnel proposed to replace the [Alaskan Way Viaduct](#).

What do you say?

Eric de Place, a senior researcher at the [Sightline Institute](#), fed the audience red meat or, well, tofu.

"We're proposing to spend \$4 billion dollars on a mile and a half of high-speed road," he said. "I have a very hard time seeing it makes a ton of sense."

Given climate change, inevitably rising energy costs and significant shortfalls in transit funding, the money could be better spent elsewhere, de Place said. "Four billion dollars for sidewalks, that's what I'd like to see, and some fancy walking shoes."

[Chuck Ayers](#), executive director of [Cascade Bicycle Club](#), took a more political view, saying he was pleased the proposed tunnel would do a decent job of reconnecting the street grid and reduce high-speed automobile capacity through downtown.

"In the political reality that we face today, there wasn't much option for the politicians," Ayers said, adding he hoped the tunnel could one day be devoted to transit and freight.

The exchange was a highlight of a Friday town hall session about envisioning the Puget Sound Region's transportation future. Future sessions will look at new transportation opportunities and investments in the region, and feature a discussion with key federal, state and local decision makers.

During the non-tunnel part of Friday's forum, transit advocate Carla Saulter said one barrier to people taking transit was the view that it's slow and inconvenient.

The real problem is that transit's trying to navigate an environment built for cars, said Saulter, who is the Seattle P-I's [Bus Chick](#) reader blogger. "It's not that you couldn't have an efficient, easy-to-use transit system."

Despite the inconveniences, she said. "I live a middle-class, fun, filling life, and I don't own a car."

Sightline's de Place said adding one highway lane in an urban area causes at least 100,000 more tons of carbon dioxide emissions over 50 years.

"That is very conservative," he said. "In fact, you could plausibly argue the figure is twice that high."

In addition to being an environmental concern, transportation choices also will be an economic issue, thanks to coming policies that will put a price on carbon emissions, de Place said.

"Expanding our current road network is exactly the wrong way to go."

They're also an equity issue, given that the number of hours of work needed to pay for 15 gallons of gas has jumped from 3.3 in 1970 to 7.5 now for minimum-wage earners, increased from 1.4 to 2.5 hours for median earners but dropped from 3.2 minutes to 33 seconds for the typical chief executive, he said. "It's getting more unfair over time."

City Councilwoman Jan Drago said the city is right to focus on encouraging urban villages where people live closer to where they work or to public transit.

"The most important thing that we can do is provide more public transit and alternative modes of transportation," she said. "We're a few decades behind most of the big cities in the United States in terms of transit."

That's changing now, with new rapid-ride buses, light rail and streetcar routes, she said.

But really funding alternative transportation will require more money, Drago said. "I believe that our entire road system in Seattle and probably Bellevue as well will be tolled."

That means paying to drive on the viaduct (or what replaces it), Interstate 5, Highway 520 and I-90 "at a minimum," she said. "And it may be more than that by 2040."

Kevin Desmond, general manager of [King County Metro Transit](#), spoke to the need for finding some new source of transit funding, noting that Metro has a projected \$168-million budget hole for 2009 and 2010, despite about \$50 million in deficit filling stimulus money and several fare increases.

All this comes as ridership has surged about 20 percent over the past three years, with increases starting even before last year's jump in gas prices, Desmond said. "Over the last three years we've been among the fastest-growing transit systems in the united states."

Hard decisions will start coming in June, when the county executive sends a budget to the County Council, he said.

More people may be riding the bus, but the region's transportation system probably won't look much different in 20 years than it does now, Ayers said.

It won't really change until society changes its view that driving by yourself in a car is a right, not a privilege, and that driving is society's economic engine, he said.

"The money flows to that entitlement," he said. "It does not flow to bicycles. It does not flow to pedestrians. It does not flow to transit."

More money is starting to go to alternatives and people are becoming more accepting of tolls, Ayers said.

Getting politicians to devote more money to non-car transportation takes mass movement, with lots of people writing lots of letters, he said. "Politicians respond to voters."

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