Written Statement of

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Transportation Challenges of Metropolitan Areas

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Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today about the transportation challenges facing America's metropolitan areas as the economic and population centers of our country.

I am King County Executive Ron Sims, and I am proud to serve as the elected leader of the fourteenth largest county in the nation. King County covers 2,000 square miles and stretches from the shores of Puget Sound to the snow-crested peaks of the Cascade Mountains. It contains Seattle and 38 smaller cities as well as farmland and forests, four major river systems and hundreds of lakes and streams. Our county is home to 1.8 million people, and includes corporate headquarters for companies as diverse as Starbucks, Amazon.com, PACCAR and Microsoft.

The Puget Sound region as a whole is the twelfth largest in the country and includes more than 3.2 million residents and 1.7 million jobs, or about 51 percent of the population and 58 percent of employment in Washington state. Yet the region disproportionately accounts for more than 67 percent of the state's entire gross domestic product. Our region's economy and population are both growing extremely fast, forecasted to add another 1.5 million people over the next thirty years. I think about how the decisions I make as an elected official today will shape what our region looks like decades from now, and about whether the people living there—including my children and grandchildren—will enjoy well-being and prosperity. That is why I am pleased to speak before you today about transportation, which consistently polls as one of the most important concerns of the public—especially their frustration with traffic congestion.

Transportation is vital to our region's economy and quality of life—and metropolitan areas like mine are, in turn, the drivers of the American economy. According to the Brookings Institution, America's top 100 metropolitan areas generate 75 percent of the nation's gross domestic product. But these economic engines could begin to sputter if we

do not address two major transportation challenges facing metropolitan regions: aging highway infrastructure and crippling traffic congestion. According to the Texas Transportation Institute, in 2003 congestion in the top 85 urban areas caused 3.7 billion hours of travel delay and 2.3 billion gallons of wasted fuel, at a total cost of $63 billion dollars. In addition, the transportation sector generates one-third of harmful greenhouse-gas emissions, and increasing passenger vehicle miles traveled and idling in congestion significantly harms our national environmental objectives.

The public is clamoring for us to do something about these problems—now. In a recent King County poll that asked people to rank the urgency of a number of transportation issues, 55 percent of the respondents ranked reducing traffic congestion as the most urgent challenge.

An Innovative Approach

The good news is that we can meet our transportation challenges by taking an innovative approach and by using new tools that are available to us. Instead of viewing transportation narrowly as an issue of road capacity, we are finding that we can gain many benefits by taking a holistic approach that looks at whole transportation systems; that considers transportation in the broader context of economic, national security, environmental, health, and social needs; and that employs an integrated set of transportation management tools.

King County government is well-positioned to deliver the needed transportation services, in collaboration with others. We play a leading role in transportation planning, maintain roads and bridges in unincorporated areas, and own and operate Metro Transit, one of the ten largest transit systems in the nation. Metro provides a broad range of services, and has grown tremendously over the past three years—like many transit agencies across the nation. Metro provided 113 million passenger trips in 2007.

King County also is excited to be a part of several national efforts to consider how to reform our federal transportation appropriations and policies, so we can put new approaches to work meeting the challenges of metropolitan regions and helping maintain America's position in the global economy.

To be effective, we must consider the potential of new or non-traditional tools. Last year, King County and partner agencies were selected for a U.S. Department of Transportation "Urban Partnership" that will provide federal funding for congestion-reduction measures including variable tolling, major new transit improvements, traffic-management technologies, telecommuting strategies and other choices and incentives to influence commuters' behavior. We believe that this mix of approaches is promising. Variable tolling—in combination with increased transit services—holds particular promise in our region as a tool for reducing traffic congestion and paying for infrastructure improvements. Unlike traditional flat-rate tolling, variable tolling charges higher rates when traffic is heavy, thus encouraging travelers to drive at non-peak travel times, take transit, combine trips, or carpool.

I would like to briefly discuss two case studies in King County that illustrate how innovative approaches and new tools can be used to replace aging transportation infrastructure and reduce congestion.

State Route 520 Case Study

The first situation concerns the increasingly congested east-west corridor in the Seattle-King County metropolitan region. State Route 520, the Lake Washington floating bridge between I-5 and I-405, is one of the most congested corridors in the region. This corridor connects Seattle and growing suburban cities, linking some of the country's most vibrant technology and manufacturing centers and some of the most desirable residential areas in North America.

SR 520 was built in 1963 as a four-lane toll bridge and is now more than forty years old. According to the Washington State Department of Transportation, the bridge was designed to carry 65,000 cars per day; today it carries an average of 115,000 cars per day. State engineers gave the bridge a rating of 44 out of 100 on a recent structural integrity test. For comparison, the bridge that collapsed in Minnesota last year was rated as a 50. Replacement of the SR 520 bridge is a critical, high-priority infrastructure project.

The major population and employment centers in the central Puget Sound region are separated by Lake Washington. SR 520 and I-90 are the sole east-west connections across the lake and are heavily traveled by commuters in both directions.

Last spring, King County, the Washington State Department of Transportation and the Puget Sound Regional Council—our metropolitan planning organization—joined together to address the problems of traffic congestion in the SR 520 corridor and the shortage of funds to replace the bridge. Together, we developed a proposal for the United States Department of Transportation's Urban Partnership program that I mentioned earlier. Our strategy incorporates "Four T's"—tolling (in particular variable tolling), transit, technology and telecommuting. Implementation of this strategy should bring much-needed congestion relief to this corridor. We estimate an increase of up to 35 percent in transit ridership, as well as reduction of vehicle-miles traveled and greenhouse-gas emissions. In addition, revenue generated by variable tolling, along with state and federal gas-tax revenue, will be used to finance replacement of the bridge.

In August of 2007, King County and its partners in the Lake Washington Urban Partnership were awarded $127 million to implement this strategy. The Washington Legislature paved the way for this project in its recently completed 2008 session, passing a policy bill that will enable variable tolling on the SR 520 bridge.

Alaskan Way Viaduct Case Study

My second case study involves the Alaskan Way Viaduct, an elevated highway built in 1953 that runs along the Elliott Bay waterfront in Seattle's industrial district and downtown Seattle. It is similar in design to the Cypress Street Viaduct in Oakland that was destroyed in the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. The Alaskan Way Viaduct is the smaller of two major north-south traffic corridors through Seattle; it carries up to 110,000 vehicles per day. In 2001, the Nisqually earthquake damaged the viaduct, and state and local officials were confronted with the need to replace the existing structure.

The Washington Governor and Legislature allocated $2.8 billion towards this effort. But in March 2007, city residents voted against replacing the viaduct with a new elevated structure or a tunnel.

Since that time, Governor Christine Gregoire, Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels and I have been spearheading a collaborative process that can serve as a national model for solving tough metropolitan transportation challenges. Our tri-agency process locks together state highway, county transit, and city transportation professionals in an innovative, comprehensive problem-solving approach.

The Alaskan Way Viaduct runs along Seattle's central waterfront.

The first thing we agreed to do was move forward immediately with $915 million worth of work on the north and south ends of the viaduct. This was critical to keeping the structure safe and maintaining freight access to Seattle's seaport. Delay would have driven up costs and left trucks, cars and buses stuck in traffic.

Next, we redefined the purpose and need of the remaining "middle mile" of the project. Initially, planners' goal had been to move the same number of vehicles on the same alignment as the existing viaduct. They largely ignored the importance of the central waterfront as a community asset. We changed that by adopting a set of guiding principles for the project that better reflect our community's economic, social and environmental values as well as our transportation needs. We also began to look more broadly at how Interstate 5, surface streets, transit, as well as policy and management changes could play roles in solving the viaduct replacement problem. In other words, we are taking a more comprehensive approach that considers the viaduct in the context of the whole transportation system, and considers transportation for its impacts on the economy, climate change, and place-making for people.

Finally, we strengthened this approach by forming a stakeholders committee of thirty citizens representing diverse points of view to tell us their thoughts about possible solutions.

When this process is completed before the end of the year, the Governor, Mayor and I will announce our solution for the central waterfront. I believe we will have a plan that will increase our reliance on transit for travel to and from downtown Seattle, and will also make strategic investments in the broader north-south corridor, enabling us to free up precious space on the waterfront for a less intrusive and less polluting roadway solution.

Principles to Consider in Transportation Policy Reform

These two case studies show that metropolitan regions are ready to use bold new strategies to solve the challenges of critical aging road infrastructure and congestion. They also illustrate several key principles that we would like you to consider as you take up the matter of reforming national policies concerning federal highway and transit investment.

First, we need to take a holistic approach to transportation investment. Dividing transportation funding into narrow programs and projects tends to limit thinking on the best way to solve transportation problems. Particularly in the larger metropolitan areas, we need to have the local officials who are responsible for streets, transit and non-motorized travel sitting in the same room with state highway officials to come up with the best transportation solutions. We should employ a coordinated set of transportation strategies to improve mobility, rather than a narrow focus on roads alone. A report issued this year by the bipartisan National Surface Transportation Policy Commission emphasized this point.

A holistic approach also means that transportation decisions must take into account the broader role of transportation in society. Land-use and transportation are inextricably linked. Reducing urban sprawl and long drive times can improve our quality of life by easing stress and providing people more time at home with their families.

Environmental impacts must also be considered—in particular, the transportation sector's production of greenhouse-gas emissions that cause global warming. Nationally, the transportation sector is responsible for 33 percent of CO_2 emissions, and those emissions are projected to increase rapidly. Passenger vehicles—cars and light trucks—are responsible for more than three-fifths of transportation sector CO_2 emissions. As the Urban Land Institute points out in its new book, *Growing Cooler*, transportation strategies that reduce vehicle-miles traveled, such as compact development, increased transit, and highway pricing, are essential in our efforts to combat global warming.

We also need to consider how we can reduce our dependence on unreliable sources of foreign oil. This is both an economic and a national security imperative. Transportation decisions can play a critical role in reaching this goal.

The second principle concerns who should manage tolling projects. As you know, I am a strong advocate for variable tolling in our congested metropolitan areas. Variable tolling is not viable on every highway or in every region, but it has the potential to yield many

benefits for our larger metropolitan regions, including more revenue for highway and road maintenance, expanded transit service and transit-oriented development.

While I share the current administration's interest in variable tolling as a congestion-relief tool, I do not support privatizing our publicly financed infrastructure assets. These assets must be managed to meet the public's transportation needs, and responsibility to do so must remain with government. At the same time, tempting as it may be, we must not divert tolling revenue for general government purposes. The public cares how toll revenue is used, and believes tolls are transportation fees that should be reinvested in transportation projects and programs.

Finally, we must be mindful of social equity as we embrace variable tolling as a new revenue tool. I believe variable tolling is less burdensome to low-income residents than sales, property, gas or car-tab taxes. Variable tolling also gives people choices: Everyone has the opportunity to travel during off-peak hours or take slower roads to reduce costs—or they can choose to pay a fee for those important trips. Low-income bus riders also benefit from faster and more reliable bus trips after tolling reduces congestion. I must add that it would be irresponsible to price a roadway for all consumers without offering robust transit services as an alternative to paying a toll. Transit must be part of any variable tolling proposal.

Public Support for a New Approach

As policy-makers consider variable tolling and other new approaches to funding and managing roads and transit, they naturally will ask if the public is ready for such change. The good news is that the public is eager for congestion relief and supportive of tolling highways.

Nustats, a public-opinion research firm in Austin, Texas, recently conducted a review of 103 public-opinion surveys about tolling and road pricing. The firm concluded that a clear majority support tolling and road pricing.

In King County, public-opinion polling conducted in late December found a strong preference for tolling over sales tax or vehicle-related fees and taxes to finance the SR 520 bridge replacement project. Eighty-four percent of respondents favored tolling while only 10 percent preferred a sales tax. When asked about vehicle-related charges such as a gas tax or car-tab fees, 78 percent of respondents favored tolling and 17 percent favored the vehicle-related charges.

The Nustats review also discovered that the public cares about how the revenue is used. People are more supportive of variable tolling when the revenue is used to fund transportation infrastructure in their state. Support tends to be higher for highway infrastructure or public transit improvements, and/or to complete necessary transportation construction faster.

Once again, those opinions were reflected in our local public-opinion research. When we asked people if they would support tolling if the toll revenue would be invested not only in bridge replacement but also in increased transit, bicycle lanes, and technology to improve traffic flow, 74 percent supported tolling and 24 percent opposed it. When we asked people if they would support tolling if the revenue would be used for bridge replacement only, support for tolling dropped to 64 percent and opposition rose to 34 percent—a net 20 percent shift—even though respondents were told that this would result in a lower toll rate.

Furthermore, once voters understood variable tolling and its ability to ease congestion, they supported it over flat-rate tolling (69 percent supported and 29 percent opposed variable tolling, while 53 percent supported and 43 percent opposed fixed-price tolling). In our survey we likened variable tolling to the way movie theaters charge less for matinees, when fewer people come to the theater. We explained that variable tolling encourages people to drive during off-peak times, take transit, combine trips or carpool. People got it and liked it.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you about the transportation challenges facing metropolitan regions. I look forward to your efforts to consider how federal transportation policy can ensure that we employ innovative new strategies to finance our most critical road infrastructure and move people and goods more efficiently.