

**BEFORE THE WASHINGTON
UTILITIES & TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION**

In the Matter of the Petition of

PUGET SOUND ENERGY

For Penalty Mitigation Associated with Service Quality Index No. 11-Electric Safety
Response Time Annual Performance for Period Ending December 31, 2021

DOCKET UE-220216

COREY J. DAHL

**ON BEHALF OF THE
WASHINGTON STATE OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
PUBLIC COUNSEL UNIT**

EXHIBIT CJD-7

2021 Seattle Times Report on Traffic Volumes

December 2, 2022

Traffic Lab
The Seattle Times

Seattle-area traffic increasing, but still below pre-pandemic levels

Dec. 6, 2021 at 9:00 pm | Updated Dec. 7, 2021 at 10:32 am



Traffic flows over the Interstate 5 ship canal bridge on Sept. 18, 2021. (Bettina Hansen / The Seattle Times)

By **David Kroman** 

Seattle Times staff reporter

It's not just your imagination – traffic congestion is slowly returning to Seattle-area roads. But while we're no longer in the quietest days of the pandemic, delays on the region's highways, byways and arterials are still well below those of 2019, according to a new report from Kirkland-based Inrix, which collects and analyzes traffic data.

When compared to driving on empty roads, the average driver in the Seattle region lost 30 hours to traffic congestion in 2021. That's up from 25 hours the year before, but still far below the 74 hours estimated in 2019.

Trips to downtown Seattle remain depressed at 36% fewer than in 2019, a sign of the protracted pandemic and on-again, off-again plans from large employers to bring their workers back to the office.

“There was talk about Carmageddon last year, about people avoiding transit and hopping in their car and just driving a bunch of miles,” said Bob Pishue, an analyst for Inrix. “What this shows is that that didn't happen and it's probably not likely to happen.... It's more of a gradual return for the country.”

Although increased since last year, Seattle's traffic congestion is still 60% below 2019 levels, which is a slower return than many U.S. cities. Where it was the country's 15th slowest region in 2020, it's now the 21st. Southern cities like Miami and New Orleans are creeping back toward their previous levels of traffic at just 20% down from pre-COVID levels. Las Vegas, meanwhile, was actually more congested in 2021 than it was in 2019.

Pishue suggested that the presence of tech giants like Microsoft and Amazon means the Seattle region may not be under the same pressure to return to the roads. Just as those companies were among the first to shutter their offices in 2020, their employees are now well-accustomed to remote work today.

“There are multiple things going into this this year, but what we have noticed is that in those [locations] that have the ability or a culture of telecommuting, we have seen a significant reduction in congestion,” said Pishue.

Docket UE-220216

Exh. CJD-7

Page 3 of 4

The worst corridors in the region are unlikely to surprise most commuters. The stretch going south into Tacoma on Interstate 5 – beginning around the Wild Waves water park – was considered to be the country’s 12th most congested. Going north on I-5 from Northgate toward Everett was the country’s 19th slowest stretch.

The slowest corridor in the country was also on I-5, but thousands of miles to the south in Los Angeles, the city that invented traffic.

Pishue noted that not all corridors are seeing an equal return of traffic. Routes that run north and south have started slowing more noticeably, while east and west commutes are still relatively open – perhaps because of the Eastside’s heavy tech industry.

Inrix collects GPS pings of drivers and tracks how long it takes them to move from one point to another. In aggregate, the data paints a picture of traffic patterns.

Although based locally, the report looks globally. With some exceptions, the data paints a similar picture for international cities, most of which have seen some return of traffic, but not to 2019 levels. London, the report concluded, sapped the greatest number of hours from drivers of any city in the world. Paris, Brussels, Moscow and New York rounded out the top 5.

It’s a similar story when it comes to public transportation, most of which has seen a slight rebound from the depths of the pandemic, but still lags below what’s considered normal. Sound Transit’s various modes tallied more than 4 million total rides in February 2020; in April 2020, that was close to 500,000. By September of this year, ridership had [bumped back to nearly 2 million riders](#).

Spokesperson for Sound Transit, John Gallagher, said October’s light-rail ridership was 75% of 2019’s, helped in part by the opening of three new stops in North Seattle. The future, however, is unclear. “While we certainly hope ridership continues to grow, the pandemic has schooled all of us in uncertainty,” he said.

King County Metro ridership has [also begun to climb](#), but is still below 2019 levels.

With the omicron variant lurking, the same uncertainty applies to the entire region’s transportation patterns. For example, demand for office space in Seattle dropped 31%

between September and October, [according to commercial leasing platform VTS](#) – the steepest decline of the cities surveyed. Amazon announced in October it [was indefinitely delaying](#) its date for bringing workers back into the office.

Docket UE-220216

Exh. CJD-7

Page 4 of 4

Statewide, highways are starting to look more normal. According to [sample data](#) from the Washington State Department of Transportation collected across 32 locations in the state, traffic has nearly returned to 2019's level.

David Kroman: 206-464-3196 or dkroman@seattletimes.com; on Twitter: [@KromanDavid](https://twitter.com/KromanDavid). *Seattle Times staff reporter David Kroman covers transportation.*

 [View 39 Comments](#)