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Jeffrey T. Schultz
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via First Class Mail and
email to: SchultJ@wsdot.wa.gov

Re: Rail Crossing Closure Issues – Mount Vernon

Dear Mr. Schultz:

Richard Smith has asked me to respond to the traffic study of the Hickox Road closure proposed by BNSF and WSDOT near Mount Vernon between Old Highway 99 and the Dike Road.

The first and most obvious problem with the study is that it collected data on traffic during January / February 2006. The timing is not compatible with finding the peak flows of traffic in the study area. If you are studying birds it would be like looking for Trumpeter Swans in the summer when they are fledging their young on Wrangell Island. There is significantly more traffic associated with the agricultural use of this study area between March 15 and October 15. So, the impact on property owners including dairy, crop farmers, nursery, stock producers and others in the agricultural community are significantly underestimated by the study. These users are potentially in need of emergency medical services and fire response which your study shows suffer a decline in level of service if the closure option is chosen. The study also fails to differentiate among uses.

Closing a crossing has one level of impact for emergency vehicles and another for agricultural use. Tractors, cultivators, planters, spray rigs, irrigation and harvest equipment can each have their own special needs. In general the vehicles and equipment necessary for farming are a hazard to higher speed traffic and themselves on the frontage roads. Thus, cutting off a crossing road has a very heavy impact on the agricultural use of the land between the railroad tracks and the Skagit River. Under the Growth Management Act the area west of the railroad tracks has been designated for agricultural use as land with long-term commercial value for agricultural production. The option you are proposing negates that planning to a significant degree. It subordinates agriculture to rail transport

This problem with land use must be looked at in the context of Mount Vernon's Urban Growth Area encroaching upon traditional agricultural land. Hickox Road on both sides of the railroad tracks forms the southern boundary of the Mount Vernon Urban Growth Area. Within the area

east of the railroad tracks a substantial level of development has been achieved and the infrastructure investment made by Mount Vernon will transform this area.

This study does not recognize the need to coordinate crossing of I-5 and the rail road tracks. The relationship between Hickox crossing I-5 and the tracks is an important one.

The study fails to include contacts with the County and City of Mount Vernon transportation planners. For example, Dennis Carlson at Mount Vernon Development Services is usually contacted with regard to all Mount Vernon related transportation development issues. No where is his name or input recorded in the final report in draft form. Esco Bell, the Public Works Director for the City of Mount Vernon is also not mentioned and Jana Hansen, the Director of Development Services is not quoted or apparently contacted about this study.

Skagit County Public Works has a roads section headed by David Sheridan. Mr. Sheridan's input on the traffic impacts of the project are also not seen in the report. This may partially explain the opposition of the Skagit County Board of Commissioners. The Commissioners are very aware of the obligation under the Growth Management Act to protect long-term commercially significant farmland and to serve rural residences through fire protection and emergency services. The failure of the study to recognize the significance of Hickox Road as a border between City of Mount Vernon urban development and Skagit County agriculture is a fault, regardless of the levels of service.

Two alternatives are presented in the study. No mention is made of the alternative of rerouting Hickox Road around the proposed closure. There is also no mention of the alternative for providing a second track south of Stackpole Road and north of the Conway crossing. The area served and the loss of the level of service would be minimized by closing the Peter Johnson Road and leaving the Stackpole and Hickox Roads open for crossing. The desired length of siding for freight trains or other passing traffic could be achieved in the southern area. This would no doubt involve filling and grading some farm land. However, the remainder would be adequately served for transportation services, law enforcement and emergency response time. The heavy impacts on the Britt Road and Dike Road which flow from closing the Hickox crossing are avoided. The City of Mount Vernon plans for developing the urban growth area North of Hickox Road are preserved under this alternative.

The report fails to explain why the particular length of siding is demanded. Is there an alternative which allows the track to be improved up to but not across the Hickox Road? Trains in the range of 100 cars can be held by lengthening the second track from Pedersen Road to Hickox Road, without closing the crossing at Hickox Road. A rough estimate would be 1-½ miles of available siding without impacting the intersection at Blackburn and the intersection of Hickox and the railroad tracks.

In summary, the rail transportation planning would fit better with the surface transportation needs if the Hickox Road were left open as a connection between the east and west sides of Interstate 5. Any alternative which closes the Hickox Road will have substantial impacts on

agriculture, future development of Mount Vernon, and on the present residents of rural Skagit County, especially those on the west side of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe rail line which would be closed by this proposed action.

Respectfully yours,

JONES & SMITH

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