Implementing Transportation Concurrency: The City of Bellingham Experience

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The Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) (RCW 36.70A.070) requires that infrastructure improvements or strategies to accommodate development be available when the impacts of development occur. For transportation facilities, concurrency is defined in the GMA and the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) to mean that any needed transportation improvements or programs be in place at the time of development or that a financial commitment exists to complete the improvements or strategies within six years. Local governments have a significant amount of flexibility regarding how to apply transportation concurrency within their plans, regulations, and permit systems.

The City of Bellingham's Comprehensive Plan envisions a dense, vibrant downtown and several "urban villages" with a mix of land use types. Initially, the City set out to develop an interim concurrency program that complied with GMA, was straightforward to administer, and implemented the City's adopted level of service (LOS) standards. The City's adopted LOS standard is based on volume-to-capacity ratio for arterial links and has been in place since 1995. Ultimately, the City intends to develop a concurrency program that specifically enables the land uses envisioned in the Comprehensive Plan.

There are many challenges to developing a transportation concurrency program. Developing the implementation strategy is one of the last steps in the overall program development; however, it is one of the most important components. The implementation strategy must be consistent with the overall program goals and objectives. It is where the planning rubber meets the regulatory road.

One of the primary program objectives was to develop a straightforward implementation component. The City desired to have some control over the concurrency testing process. To that end, a tool was needed to test concurrency applications accurately and fairly, yet be streamlined enough for City staff to operate and maintain. What resulted was a spreadsheet-based tool used to compare short-range traffic volume forecasts with the estimated capacity of the City's arterial roadways.

Each agency has unique concurrency program goals and objectives. It is important that the implementation strategy be tailored to support the overall program objectives. While each program is different, there are common challenges in applying all types of concurrency programs. The City of Bellingham's experience highlights some of the common challenges in implementing concurrency.