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Guest columnists

Covering parts of I-5 will relieve gridlock, reconnect neighborhoods

By **Bruce Chapman and Bruce Agnew**

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When the state of Washington was planning Interstate 5 through Seattle some 45 years ago, a young civic leader named Jim Ellis urged state officials to take advantage of a rare opportunity. To keep the city connected and increase transportation options, he advised building lids across the freeway and running rail transit down the freeway median.

The proposal sparked enthusiasm among planners and nascent citizen groups. But state highway director Bill Bugge said no. Years later, after the freeway was operating and he had retired, Bugge acknowledged his mistake. But it was too late. The transit-down-the-median idea was put on hold. Ellis eventually did succeed in creating two important but limited Interstate 5 lids — for Freeway Park and the Washington Convention and Trade Center.

Now the state plans to spend \$2 billion to rebuild and repave the freeway. That's partly good news; I-5 needs attention. But a short-term fix will not relieve our growing gridlock, reconnect neighborhoods or recover usable air rights.

Therefore, rather than repave I-5, we should do an "extreme makeover." Covering sections of the freeway and enhancing its efficiency for transit are even more important today than in the 1960s.

Overall the "central freeway" has served the city well, providing vital north/south access. But it was designed for a smaller population and is nearly overwhelmed now. Who knows its true costs in terms of noise, air pollution, oil runoff, severed neighborhoods, and lost opportunities for housing and tax revenues?

The freeway's design flaws, including left-hand off-ramps and white-knuckle weaves, are legendary but malleable. The same pillars that are buried deep to prevent Capitol Hill from sliding into downtown could help support future lids.

A bold strategy for I-5 should create new public land in a crowded urban environment. Anyone who has played in the park over I-90 on Mercer Island (built in the 1980s) knows the transforming effect of green space and open fields.

Imagine the potential benefits of several lids across the central freeway. Lids could reconnect North Capitol Hill and Eastlake, the University District and Wallingford, and Northgate's east and west sections. The downtown lids could be extended to provide a grand staircase from Capitol Hill to South Lake Union.

Skeptics argue that lids are too costly, especially without the federal dollars that paid for I-90. But too expensive for whom? If the lids are occupied by businesses, by housing, parks or sports fields, we can tap into their economic and social value to offset the construction costs.

We might, for example, use civil-service union pension funds to build housing on the newly created land for public-school teachers, police officers and other local public servants who have been priced out of Seattle's housing market.

Planners call this "smart growth" — accommodating newcomers by creating new urban spaces instead of more suburban sprawl.

It is also smart business. Federal assistance can include tax credits to private developers and public housing authorities to match pension funds and commercial development opportunities.

Federal dollars also can come through the federal transportation program, TEA-21. Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., is the ranking minority member of the key committee that funds projects. In the House, Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, transportation committee chairman, wants to expand federal transportation spending by 40 percent to rebuild our interstate system for security as well as mobility. Political allies could be sought in cities such as Portland, Cincinnati and Philadelphia to lid freeways in a special "Metropolitan Land Reclamation" campaign.

Across the region, many people ask: Why not run a second monorail line down I-5?

Spent separately, the \$2 billion for rebuilding I-5 and the \$2 billion to \$3 billion for light rail to Northgate both miss the mark. So let's combine our transit and highway dollars into one central project.

A second monorail line on I-5 along Stewart Street could connect with the recently approved Green Line monorail at Westlake Center, avoiding the Convention Center bottleneck. This would free up space in the I-5 reversible lanes for more "bus rapid transit."

Traveling north, the freeway monorail could be built above the reversible lanes on I-5 and adjacent to the Lake Washington Ship Canal Bridge. New freeway lids in Eastlake, Wallingford, the University District and Northgate could facilitate connections with local buses, as well as a possible monorail along Northeast 45th Street.

Seattle has few public places that provide a grand view of our landscape. Just imagine standing over I-5 at Northeast 45th Street gazing at the Olympics, Space Needle, Lake Union, Mount Rainier and Lake Washington!

These are ideas for a long-term plan drafted with the same foresight of President Dwight Eisenhower when he created the interstate highway system. Start with a new marker pen and see how we can mix traditional highway and transit funding with new user fees and housing and technology partnerships.

Most of all, avoid rebuilding a structure that was outdated almost as soon as it was built five decades ago. Instead, redesign it for the needs of today, and five decades from now.

Think smart, not small.

For information about the Cascadia Project and its new transportation report, visit www.cascadiaproject.org

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