



SENATOR

Mary Margaret Haugen

E-Newsletter - 10th District

Sep. 2, 2009

Hello again!

I hope you're enjoying the summer weather as much as I am. This time of year, in between legislative commitments, I like to spend as much time as possible with my family and working in the garden with my husband. There just isn't enough time in the day, is there?

Here's a fresh update on some of the things that have crossed my desk in recent days. As always, if you'd like to know about a particular issue the Legislature covered, let me know and I may be able to cover it in a future e-newsletter.

KEEPING AN EYE ON DOUBLE BLUFF ROAD AND SR 525

A constituent recently raised safety concerns about the intersection at SR 525 and Double Bluff Road, where there have been at least eight crashes in a three-year span. I say "at least" because not everyone reports accidents, especially if they're minor fender benders. I've been concerned about this intersection, too, so I asked the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) where things stand.

WSDOT has assessed what it would cost to improve the intersection, and because of an adjacent slope and wetlands, the cost would be considerable — between \$2 million and \$5 million. In fact, it would cost as much as \$200,000 just to do the engineering to produce a more precise estimate. At the same time, WSDOT has studied the eight accidents and considers them minor crashes — most, if not all, did not cause personal injury.

This is only one of several intersections along the corridor that have comparable crash histories and geographical problems that inhibit widening. Others include Scott Road, Woodard Road, Cameron Road and Bush Point / Honeymoon Bay Road.

Improvements at any particular intersection would be expensive, but WSDOT staff is looking for ways to give us the greatest benefit at the lowest cost in this high-need area. They're working with Island County to take advantage of available funding (grants, developer contributions, traffic safety funds, etc.) and pursue corridor-wide improvements. For example, WSDOT staff is working with Island County to seek additional funds for improvements at Bush Point / Honeymoon Bay Road, and is also working with a developer on possible improvements to the south at Bayview. Many of you are also probably aware of the \$250,000 project to widen SR 525 and create the left turn lane for southbound traffic onto Thompson Road. That project should be completed soon.

What ultimately happens in these areas depends on the availability of funding, which of course is complicated by our bleak state revenue picture and the number of projects already waiting to be funded that pose greater threats to public safety. But either way, I'll keep you up to date on our progress.

In the meantime, the staff at WSDOT will continue to keep track of conditions at the intersection to make sure it's not more hazardous than it appears. And to make sure we have an accurate picture of this intersection or any other potential problem areas, I'd like to encourage motorists everywhere to report all accidents, even those that are not major, because that's the only way we can know the true extent of a dangerous road condition — and take the necessary action to correct it.

SIGNS OF ECONOMIC RECOVERY

We're starting to see signs that our efforts to stimulate the economy appear to be paying off. For starters, for the first time in months, Washington's jobless rate decreased to 9.1 percent in July, down from June's 9.2 percent unemployment rate. Now that doesn't signal the end of the national recession, by any means, but it is an indicator that our economy is beginning to stabilize and the recession is slowing.

In the last month, our state gained an estimated 4,000 jobs. Education and health services saw the greatest employment growth with 4,400 new jobs, and professional and business services industries added 2,100 jobs.

Meanwhile, the state's Economic and Revenue Forecast Council issued a recent report indicating tax collections fell \$23 million below projections during the past month. That figure represents a small fraction of the state budget, and it provides further evidence that the freefall in state revenue may be over.

If there's a silver lining to these difficult times, you can find it in our Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund. We have the highest trust fund balance in the nation, with reserves to pay unemployment benefits for the next 16 months. In fact, our trust fund is so healthy we were able to increase weekly benefits by \$45 to help many of our unemployed friends and neighbors make ends meet. It's times like these when the term "safety net" really hits home — and makes a huge difference in people's lives.

By comparison, 18 states are borrowing from the U.S. Department of Labor to cover their jobless residents' unemployment benefits because their trust funds are bankrupt. These states will have to pay back the Unemployment Insurance funds they are now borrowing from the federal government, with interest. So while these are tough times, it could be worse — and we'll come out of this in a position to get back on our feet faster than a lot of states.

HEALTH CARE REFORM TALKS HEATING UP

As you've probably noticed, the national debate over health care reform is really starting to heat up. With Congress taking time off to study various proposals, critics and supporters of reform are working overtime to influence public opinion.

As your state senator in Olympia, while I do not have a vote on the federal health care program proposed by Congress, I am watching the health care debate closely and thought you might appreciate an update on how our state might be affected. The stakes are high for all of us, whether we pay for insurance ourselves or depend on employer plans, because medical costs continue to outpace wages and overall inflation. Employer health costs alone are expected to grow another 9 percent in 2010. That's on top of a 9.2 percent increase in 2009 and another 9.9 percent increase in 2008, so it's clear we can't afford to continue on our current path.

The Senate's [Health & Long-Term Care Committee](#) hosted a joint work session in Olympia recently to discuss how our state would be impacted by the federal proposals. Members of the business community talked about how increasing costs threaten their employees, and health care experts and providers voiced their concerns about the current system and the types of reforms they consider essential, including an option that ensures everyone has access to care.

We've worked hard in this state to improve the health care system by promoting better health information technology, preventive care and disease management, and I remain optimistic that any federal plan will allow states to continue to build on existing state reform efforts. For now, here are a few health care facts to weigh as you hear the rhetoric from both sides in the coming weeks and months:

- Since 2000, average family premiums have increased by 103 percent in Washington State.
- Washington State family premiums now average \$13,216 a year — nearly equal to the entire income of a minimum wage job.

Roughly 62 percent of personal bankruptcies are caused by medical problems, and 78 percent of the people who filed for bankruptcy had health insurance.

A record 876,000 people lack health care in our state.

I am very interested in the debate on this issue, but I do not have a vote on the final decision. As I said, this effort is taking place at the federal level in Washington, D.C., not at the state level in Olympia. If you have thoughts or questions you would like to share with your elected officials who are in a position to influence the reforms, here is their contact information:

Senator Patty Murray

2988 Jackson Federal Building, 915 Second Ave., Seattle WA 98174

Phone: (206) 553-5545

Online: <http://murray.senate.gov/email/index.cfm>

Senator Maria Cantwell

915 Second Ave., Suite 3206, Seattle WA 98174

Phone: (206) 220-6400

Online: <http://cantwell.senate.gov/contact/index.cfm>

Congressman Rick Larsen

Wall Street Building, 2930 Wetmore Ave., Suite 9-E, Everett WA 98201-1385

Phone: (425) 252-3188

Toll-Free: (800) 562-1385

E-mail: rick.larsen@mail.house.gov

EITHER OFFICE CAN HELP DURING THE LEGISLATIVE INTERIM

As always, if you have a concern, I want to hear it — in Olympia or in my local office.

You can reach me by [e-mail](#) or call my office in Olympia at **360-786-7618**, where Nova Gattman is running my office at our state's capital. You can also call my district office in Oak Harbor ([1091 SE Dock St., Suite #4](#)) at **360 682-6274** or stop by and talk to Gina Bull in person.

Until next time — Take care!