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Bellingham Herald Opinion Editorial, *Submitted by Executive Jack Louws, County Executive and Jon Hutchings, Ph.D, Public Works Director*

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A Busy Summer Construction Season in Whatcom County – Safety is Always First

Economic opportunity and high quality of life for our children and grandchildren are great motivations to serve in local government. These goals are achieved in part by assuring the safety and sufficiency of our transportation system. Our County Public Works Department operates and maintains nearly 1,000 miles of paved roads and 162 bridges that allow our goods and services to reach their markets. We use them in our daily commute to and from work and to take our children to school. Whatcom County government works very hard to make sure that our system is safe, sound, and ready for future generations of commerce and livelihood.

Summer 2015

Summer is the season for doing the public's road work. As May turns to June, Public Works employees mow roadside vegetation, keeping grass and blackberries in check to maintain site distances and drainage for safe driving. They remove hazard trees, repair culverts, and clean storm drains and ditches. June turns fully to summer and the crews focus on sealing and patching pavement, pre-leveling, and restriping roadways. The Fourth of July passes and it seems like there is a flagger and flashing orange light around almost every bend. Crews are chip-sealing roads and servicing bridges across the County. By now, our engineers and their contractors are all on the street delivering the big improvements that will accommodate the next generation of Whatcom County residents, their families, and their businesses. At Public Works, summer means action.

An aggressive road maintenance and capital improvement program is well underway this summer. It is the result of several years of preparation, involving financing, design, permitting, and right-of-way acquisition. Pavement preservation is underway in the Acme Valley and on Mosquito Lake Road, around Lake Samish, Lake Whatcom and Chuckanut. A new round-a-bout is installed at the junction of Smith Road and Everson-Goshen - thank you to our partners at Washington Department of Transportation.

During the next two months we will pave four miles of the Hannegan Road from the Bellingham City limits to Hemmi Road. This work completes a full rehabilitation of the Hannegan corridor road surface. Improvements at the intersection of Smith Road and Hannegan are planned for the near future. On Slater Road, new turn lanes and illumination will greatly improve traffic safety at the intersections of Ferndale Road and Imhof Road.

Several substantial bridge projects are also underway. These include replacement of the Nooksack Bridge at Potter Road near Van Zandt, scour work on the Nooksack River

Bridge on the Hannegan Road near Lynden, and a major seismic retrofit of the Dakota Creek Bridge on Portal Way near Blaine. The Nooksack River Bridge on Slater Road near Ferndale is being repainted.

Stormwater management and flood protection are also associated with our transportation system. An impressive new stormwater facility is under construction on Northshore Road in the Lake Whatcom watershed and other stormwater improvements are under construction in Birch Bay. Improvements to the Nooksack River levee system at Bertrand Creek and at the DeBoer levee near Ferndale will begin in the fall.

This busy schedule is expensive. Public Works will spend approximately \$5,000,000 of local property tax dollars on road maintenance work this summer. Our major road and bridge capital improvements cost about \$14,000,000. Capital improvements are funded by a mix of property tax and federal grants. Additional property taxes go to stormwater improvements and levee repairs.

Drivers are the Key to Safe Work Zones

Driving in and around work zones requires extra diligence – normal speed limits are reduced, traffic lanes may be closed, and equipment and people are often working on or near the roadway.

Those of us in the road business live by the mantra of Work Zone Safety. Driver-related factors that affect work zone crashes include speeding, distractions (such as cell phones, texting, and radios), inattentive driving, and aggressive driving. Rear-end collisions are the main type of work zone accident - adequate following distance is important!

Many drivers are surprised to learn that approximately 80% of work zone fatalities in the U.S. are drivers and passengers of vehicles. Non-motorized users of our roads, such as pedestrians and bicyclists, make up the remainder. In 2013, the most recent year for which data are available, speeding was a factor in 23% of fatal work zone crashes. Two out of three victims in work zone crashes in 2013 were drivers and their passengers. It is very, very clear – conscientious drivers make work zones safer.

Civic Pride

There is great community value and satisfaction in safe, functional, and well-maintained public infrastructure. At Public Works, maintaining the County's roads and bridges is a source of great pride. Our goal is to leave our transportation system better than we found it. Better and ready for the next generation of Whatcom County residents.

Public Works project updates are on the County website at: <http://wa-whatcomcounty.civicplus.com/334/Road-Bridge-Projects>

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