

# Delay sparks worry about finish to US Highway 12 project



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The start of Phase 7 of U.S. Highway 12 construction was so close.

Work that will widen the 11-mile stretch of the highway between the Frenchtown Vicinity and Nine Mile Hill had already been advertised to contractors when it was put on a delayed status after Initiative 976 was approved by voters.

Because the advertisement had already been in motion, partners in the U.S. Highway 12 Coalition hope they can garner support from the Legislature to get the project removed from the list and proceed as planned for March construction.

In a movement of unity, the cities of College Place and Walla Walla, and the Port of Walla Walla have all adopted resolutions that support the removal of the project from the Washington State Department of Transportation's list. Walla Walla County

commissioners are expected to consider their own resolution on the matter at an upcoming meeting.

If the effort is successful, the work could begin March 19. If it continues to be delayed, the earliest construction would start is May 13, Reay said.

“Any delay will have cost implications, there’s no doubt,” he said.

Phase 7 is estimated between \$100 million and \$200 million by WSDOT.

Reay said it’s hard to know based on the depth of the 94-project delay list if Walla Walla is the lone outlier. But a Nov. 26 letter issued by Secretary of Transportation Roger Millar included Highway 12 under delayed “construction projects that add capacity to the transportation system scheduled to go out to advertisement in the next six months...”

“The directive from the governor and WSDOT was to put projects that have not been initiated into a delayed status,” Port Executive Director Patrick Reay said last Thursday during the agency’s meeting and vote.

But this one, he said, “has a lot of accomplishments for a project that was already started some time ago.”

The project was part of the 2015 Connecting Washington funding package, a program funded primarily by a gas-tax increase fully phased-in July 2, 2016, according to WSDOT.

WSDOT, Reay and other jurisdictions say, has already invested \$20.4 million on Phase 7, completed the Environmental Assessment, secured the right-of-way, acquired more than 450 acres of private property, completed a request for qualifications, short-listed three design-bid teams and is expecting the completion of bids Tuesday after advertising in August.

With funding having already been identified, the U.S. Highway 12 Coalition, the regional partnership that prioritized the highway over the last 20 years as the top

transportation project in the region, has been lobbying at the federal level for Phase 8 funding.

Partners worry if Phase 7 funds are jeopardized, they could lose a shot at funding for Phase 8.

“If this gets derailed how do you go to the feds and say, ‘Sorry, the state pulled the rug on the corridor. Now we need money for Phase 7 and 8,’” Reay said during Thursday’s Port meeting.

Port Commissioner Mike Fredrickson questioned the constitutionality of the delay given funding is unrelated to the car tab initiative.

He said the delay feels like “the governor’s punishing the people of Washington for voting for an initiative that he didn’t like.”

The other area projects also on the delay list are the Columbia Walla Walla Railroad where \$312,000 in state funds are expected to purchase aggregate hopper cars, and Garfield County, where \$169,950 in funds were designated for replacement and/or purchase of two new vans.

The Garfield County Transportation Authority is among the nine plaintiffs that challenged I-976 about a week after the election and filed a complaint to block its implementation.

The initiative, sponsored by anti-tax activist Tim Eyman, limits annual license fees for vehicles less than 10,000 pounds to \$30, with the exception of voter-approved charges. It also repeals certain transportation-related taxes and fees, as well as authorization by regional transportation authorities to impose motor vehicle excise taxes.

The initiative garnered 52.99% support across the state. In Walla Walla County, the support was even stronger with 60.99% of the 15,110 votes approving the measure.

The rollback on car tabs is expected to reduce state transportation funds by \$451 million used by WSDOT over the next two years. That's the equivalent of about 7% of the agency's two-year budget, reports say.

Its approval from voters prompted Inslee to request WSDOT postpone projects that had not yet begun.

While the challenge takes place in court, fees continue to be collected. That, Judge Marshall Ferguson determined, was easier to do and refund if the initiative is upheld than retroactively collecting from residents who didn't pay them if it's found unconstitutional.

To date in Walla Walla, \$291,986,716 has been secured in federal, state and local dollars for the highway's expansion.

"Now we're down to two phases," Reay said.

The movement by the U.S. Highway 12 Coalition, the regional partnership that has been at the forefront to raise funds in a unified effort for the Valley, has the support of 16th and 8th Legislative District representatives. They sent a Jan. 17 letter to the House Transportation Committee with support to find solutions in prioritizing the project.

"This region has had a unified message for decades," Reay said. "The players have changed, but the priority has not."