



Keeping Track of Traffic

The city as a whole is aware that traffic seems “bad” and that complaints often focus on the City’s mad rush for “growth”. In an effort to manage expectations and to quantify the impacts of growth on traffic, Community Development has been unofficially keeping track of how many more trips are on the road as a result of development within the city.

How does the city keep track of traffic?

The answer to that actually pretty simple. Staff keeps track of all the permits that are issued, so we can predict how much traffic will occur, and when.

If you go the City Project page at www.ci.woodland.wa.us/projects/ you can see a snapshot of the development projects that are in progress within city limits. Although not a complete list, this page generally includes the active projects staff is reviewing. Some older projects are not on the page but are still within their three-year window of approval, and some are even older but still active. (Scott Hill Park is an example of an active older project because plans were approved in 2016. Just because the park isn’t open, doesn’t mean that we stop planning for that traffic to eventually come.)

Staff also continually updates a spreadsheet of every project that has been approved since 2018. We call it the Woodland Traffic Counts report. A copy of that report has been attached to the Community Development Quarterly Report since 2019 for transparency.

A copy of the most recent quarterly report is posted on the Community Development page each time it is updated. Please see: www.ci.woodland.wa.us/commdev/

The Woodland Traffic Counts report shows the Project Name; how many evening rush hour (PM Peak Hour or PMPH) trips each project is likely to generate; the year the project was “approved”; and the year that it was actually completed, which is when the traffic starts to drive on our roads. In the example below, you can see that Atlas Plumbing was expected to add less than one trip (.8 trips), while Guild Road Phase 1 Industrial Park was expected to add 122 PMPH trips. However, as you see from the note to the right the “actual new trips on the road as a result of completed construction” is less than one trip because neither of the industrial developments have been completed.

Project	PM PH	Approved	2018	2019	Actual new trips on the road as a result of completed construction.
Port Guild Road Phase 1	122.0	2018			
Port Guild Road Phase 2	169.0	2018			
Atlas Plumbing	0.8	2018		2018	0.8
Chilton Logging	0.0	2018		2019	0.0
Bilco Industrial N. Park	10.0	2018			

So, staff can tell you exactly how many trips the city expects to occur from new development. Staff can also tell you when the city started planning for those trips (when a project was approved) and how each development is mitigating for the new impacts they are causing.

Mitigation means: An action to reduce the severity, seriousness, or painfulness of something.

In the case of traffic, mitigation usually involves the building or rebuilding of roads, sidewalks, and intersections, and the payment of Transportation Impact Fees or “TIFs” (to help the city build other road improvements on top of improvements the developer already installed).

Traffic is a moving target. Can the city be trusted to know what it is doing?

Traffic from new development is a moving target because developments take time to build. Often approvals for a development can occur in one year, but construction may not actually occur for up to three (3) years or more. Plus, just because a project gets an “approval” doesn’t mean that it will start to generate traffic right away (or ever). Whether it takes time of finish engineering plans; takes time to line up construction or business loans; or it takes time for contractors to actually do the work, it may take years for development to be built. By code, city development approvals are good for three years.

For example, Burriss Creek Mini-Storage got permits for expansion in 2019, but they didn’t actually start to build their buildings until 2020 and they weren’t completed until 2021. So, we started planning in 2019 for the 7.9 evening rush hour trips expected from their business expansion, but those trips didn’t actually start driving on the roads until 2021.

What’s important to know is that projects that were approved years ago, may still not be done, so their traffic may not be on the road. It’s a moving target effect that made the Community Development Department start its tracking list.

At the same time, the city has a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) which shows all the improvements that are identified for our transportation system. While the TIP lists all the projects the system needs or wants, it also identifies the specific projects the city can afford to complete in the next six (6) years.

With this information, staff can evaluate the balance between the existing traffic, new traffic caused by development, and the improvements that the city can afford to make to our street system.

So why does traffic feel like it is getting worse?

Good question. There are a lot of factors that could contribute to that. The first is that a lot of trips go through the city to other destinations. In short, growth outside of the city causes traffic in the city and we can neither measure the effect of that traffic, nor can we accurately predict that traffic. For example, almost all growth up the Lewis River Valley has to drive SR-503 through the city to get to their destination. Just as Green Mountain Road, Woodland Bottoms, and a large amount of Clark County traffic goes through the city to get to and from I-5. We know this from the Exit 21 study conducted in 2017. It showed 2,405 PMPH vehicles going through the NB I-5 off-ramp intersection with 460 vehicles (about 20%) using the CC Street bridge to enter into Clark County, and trips equaling about another 30% using SR-503 to go up river during the evening rush hour. So, in effect, data suggests that about 50% of the vehicles using Exit 21, are generated by either Clark County or Cowlitz County. And of that traffic, the 30%+ that comes from or goes to Cowlitz County, is not supported by developer mitigation because Cowlitz County does not practice concurrency planning. When you factor in how many vehicles are on I-5 and stop in Woodland for food, shopping, or gas, then get back on I-5, you can see how the City of Woodland suffers both the pain of traffic, but also the financial benefits from more people driving on our streets. In short, we are a highway commercial oriented community and a growing economy means more traffic. Even if that growth isn’t in the city.