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Rogue Valley isn't too choked up

Jackson County comes in at Nos. 33 and 46 on list of top 50 chokepoints — or areas of traffic congestion — in Oregon

By **Greg Stiles**
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There's no denying Rogue Valley drivers' patience is strained at certain critical junctures.

Medford's busy Highway 62 corridor, including this stretch near the intersection with Poplar Drive, has been identified as one of Oregon's top 50 traffic chokepoints by TRIP, a national transportation research group.

The inconvenience of negotiating the Highway 62 corridor, watching multiple light changes before escaping the Biddle and McAndrews intersection or meandering through an orchard to reach the Fern Valley Road bridge across the freeway all are time-consuming.

Yet a new study by a Washington, D.C.-based transportation research group concludes Jackson County has few reasons to complain about traffic compared with the bottlenecks in the Willamette Valley.

Jackson County logged just two entries way down the list in "Oregon's Transportation Chokepoints: The Top 50 Chokepoints and Remedies for Relief" compiled by The Road Information Program, or TRIP, a nonprofit organization founded in 1971. The report said dealing with chokepoints (areas of traffic congestion) is critical to maintain Oregon's high quality of life as well as to improve mobility, reduce delays, enhance the environment and support economic growth.

The Interstate 5 bridge across the Columbia River to Vancouver, Wash., is the unchallenged king of the state's traffic chokepoints, primarily because there are too few lanes, which are themselves too narrow, and the bridge goes up when the big boats need to move upriver. Not only does it cause the worst congestion in the Portland region, but it also is one of the worst congestion points along the entire Interstate 5 corridor.

Medford enters the discussion at No. 33, with a seven-mile section of Highway 62 from Interstate 5 to White City. Its close

proximity to the Medford airport is creating "severe congestion and safety problems," the report said.

No. 46 on the list is the freight extension connecting Highway 140 and the freeway along Leigh Way, Agate Road, Avenue G, Kirtland Road and Blackwell Road.

Mike Quilty, chairman of the Metropolitan Planning Organization, which helps establish regional transportation goals, said the degree of traffic irritants locally pales when compared to California cities or Portland.

"I don't want to downplay the traffic problems we have here, because for us they are reasonably large," Quilty said. "But if you took a look at the traffic problems they have in most major metropolitan areas, the other metros in the country would kill to have our problems. For people who have lived in the valley for many, many years, traffic has multiplied over the years. Everything is relative and we're trying to get in front of the game before it becomes total gridlock."

Quilty suggests putting emphasis on local arterials that would take pressure off state highways and the freeway.

"We need to reinvest in our local street networks and develop a series of strong, logical, local arterial streets that let us get across the community at an average speed of 40-45 mph," Quilty said. "That means doing things like connecting Biddle Road on down to Barnett Road at the south end of Medford. When 50 percent of all the traffic on I-5 through Medford begins and ends between Exit 27 and Exit 30 or 33, that's telling us we don't have a viable local street network."

He said the state has indicated it would fund local alternatives if they can be shown to take pressure off highways.

The shape of the valley, growth patterns and past transportation decisions have



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narrowed the options, said Dave Lewin of Phoenix, a member of the MPO's advisory council

"Look at the way the communities grew before we had land-use statutes," Lewin said. "Towns grew kind of just where people wanted to build. Now we just can't build roads wherever we want because of land-use statutes protecting farmland. Also, we have a railroad down the middle of the valley and whenever you are talking (railroad) crosses, it's problematic."

Mike Montero, a member of the Rogue Valley Area Commission on Transportation, said there are parallel studies in the works as well.

"What is important to know from a more comprehensive view is what kind of bottlenecks they're examining," Montero said. "It could be limited to something as simple as (automobile) trips versus the number of lanes. An additional criteria could be what is the cost to remedy the bottleneck? What, for example, is the cost of increasing the capacity of the viaduct (over downtown Medford)?"

The issues surrounding Highways 62 and 140 are regional in nature, Montero said. "I-5 has West Coast economic impact. Washington and California are dependent on the performance of that system."

Reach reporter Greg Stiles at 541-776-4463 or e-mail business@mailtribune.com.