



# CITY OF UNIVERSITY PLACE

3715 Bridgeport Way West  
University Place, WA 98466

Phone: (253) 566-5656  
Fax: (253) 566-5658

## CONTACT

Russell Kasselmann  
Public Information Officer  
253-460-5441  
rkasselmann@cityofup.com

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## **University Place will face tough choices on transportation in next budget cycle**

Speeds are down 14 percent and accidents are down 40 percent in University Place since incorporation. Sounds good, right? It is. But those numbers may not be getting better any time soon. The budget for major road improvements that further reduce speeds and accidents, like those done on Grandview Drive and Bridgeport Way, is gone. All that's left is the annual revenue from the city's local-option gas tax that can only pay for small neighborhood projects or one larger, arterial street project once every five years.

That means hard choices for the future. Does the city save its money to use only on larger projects that affect busy streets, or continue to meet citizen demands for things like speed humps on residential streets? Citizens are quick to say they are tired of cars roaring down their streets making it unsafe for children to play in front yards. The stack of applications for speed humps and other neighborhood traffic calming measures is filling inboxes in the city's public works department and the city council is feeling the pressure to act quickly to solve problems. On the other hand, police and fire officials say too many roundabouts and speed humps in neighborhoods will make it harder for them to quickly get to people who need them. They would rather the city concentrate its money on improving arterials that affect a greater number of drivers and improve response times.

"The common goal for all of us, the city and the emergency response entities - both police and fire, is the safety of the citizens of University Place," says Fire Chief Rick Bleecker. "What we ask people to realize is we have to deal with local concerns but we also have to deal with personnel beyond that. Every time we run into one of these speed bumps our vehicles have to slow down, go over that thing and then pick up speed and then go again. The fact that we are not always responding out of our station - we could be responding from another call and we may run into more than one of these obstacles - that's what effects our response times."

Police and fire officials are currently meeting with city engineers to establish a grid that would leave certain arterials clear of any obstruction so that delays can be avoided.

"We call it the 90 percent rule," says University Place Police Chief Rob Masko, "The 90 percent rule means if we can get to a location in the city on a grid 90 percent of the way unobstructed then we can get into the neighborhoods and work through the traffic calming devices."

Fire and police officials would also like to make emergency-only connections on streets that are currently blocked by either barricades or gaps in pavement. Connections from 40<sup>th</sup> street to Cirque Drive via Alameda, from Bridgeport Way to Sunset Drive via 37<sup>th</sup> Street and from 35<sup>th</sup> Street to 27<sup>th</sup> Street via Rochester would greatly improve police and fire response times, Bleecker says.

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Beyond speedy responses, there is the issue of patient care that worries fire fighters

“If we were to put a patient in the back, say somebody's mother with a broken hip, and take them over one of the speed bumps it would jar them to the point that they would be in a lot of pain,” Bleecker says.

Fire officials would like the chance to meet with citizens who have requested a speed hump in their neighborhood to make it clear how such a device might affect the response of police and fire services before any final decisions are made.

“I think there are some cases where we could still use some more traffic tables and roundabouts can be a good means of slowing people down and getting them efficiently through intersections,” says Masko, “Depending on what the location is and what we are trying to achieve it can be one tool that can be useful if it is not over used.”

“University Place, as well as nationally, the biggest problem that traffic engineers have is to try to solve the problem of side impact collisions,” Suggs says. “At signalized intersections you have a much higher probability of that happening because you have the problem of red light runners. Simply, there are some people, its a small percentage but a very dangerous percentage, that runs red lights and when they do and they happen to hit another vehicle it has disastrous consequences, serious injuries and fatalities. With the modern roundabout there is very little chance of a side impact collision. The types of collisions you see in roundabouts are fender benders, but don't result in serious injuries. In fact there's an insurance institute for highway safety report that was published in may 2000 that showed roundabouts had 90 percent fewer fatalities than signalized intersections.”

Roundabouts also reduce traffic congestion, even at peak hours, whereas traffic signals tend to promote congestion. A perfect example of the difference between signalized intersections and intersections managed with roundabouts is Grandview Drive when the Peach Creek Bridge was closed because of a washout.

“During the storm we had in October, we lost part of the fill around the Peach Creek bridge and a tree fell down and closed the bridge for a little bit,” City Engineer Pat O'Neill says. “Because the washout occurred underneath the approach to the bridge, we had to close the road because the road was failing.”

The closure diverted an additional 5,000-plus cars per day from Chambers Creek Road to Cirque Drive and Grandview Drive.

“What we saw was very smooth traffic flow down Grandview through the series of roundabouts,” O'Neill says. “It was only when they got to the traffic signal at the Cirque/Bridgeport intersection that we saw congestion.”

But again, the budget for these types of improvements is dwindling to next to nothing, which brings us back to choices. Choices about what the city will build and also how it will maintain what it already has. Assistant Public Works Director Gary Cooper is looking into some of those hard choices this year during the budget process.

“For the last year and a half we've been one and a half persons short on our staff,” Cooper says. “We haven't filled some open positions. That's one of the ways we've been able to cut back, but that has cost us, we've had to cut back on some of the maintenance we do to make up for those man hours.”

So far, the personnel cutbacks have only meant slight time delays in getting things like street sweeping or brush cutting done in the summer, and sometimes storm drains have gone uncleaned for a couple of extra days or a pothole has taken two or three days to fix instead of getting fixed the same day, but that could all change in the next two years as budget dollars continue to be pulled back for other programs.

“In the coming year it looks like everything's going to have to be on the table,” Cooper says. “Right now we are trying to look at if we have to cut even further, what is it we are going to have to cut. We may have to eliminate the street overlay program altogether and just go to pothole patching. We may have to cut the frequency of sign maintenance, street cleaning – everything is on the table.”

Budget hearings for the 2005-2006 biennium begin in the fall. Public participation is encouraged. For more up to date information, visit our web page at [www.cityofup.com](http://www.cityofup.com) or call us at City Hall, (253) 566-5656.