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Locke leads transportation campaign

Ex-governor asks regional leaders to join him in asking voters for billions more in taxes

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The 2007 election is still 17 months away, but the campaign to win passage for a hefty package of transportation taxes in the Puget Sound area is already gearing up.

Former Gov. Gary Locke, now a lawyer in Seattle, is inviting movers and shakers in Pierce, King and Snohomish counties for a meeting to talk about how to educate voters about the need to invest more money in roads, buses and rail.

That could amount to between \$13 billion and \$16 billion, the combined total for measures that Sound Transit and the Regional Transportation Investment District plan to put on the November 2007 ballot.

Locke sent an e-mail invitation Friday to executives at Microsoft, Costco, Starbucks, The Boeing Co., Weyerhaeuser, Paul Allen's Vulcan, Wal-Mart, the Seattle Mariners, auto dealers, labor representatives and government leaders to meet with him later this month.

Locke, a Democrat, is co-leading a group to build consensus on the transportation package with conservative radio host John Carlson and Jessyn Schor, executive director of Transportation Choices, a pro-transit group.

"Our efforts will not end ... with just an investment package," the two-term governor wrote in his invitation. "During the first half of 2007 we will mount an aggressive public education

effort in support of the proposed investments, before handing matters off to the actual ballot campaign."

Last week, Sound Transit and the investment district announced plans to assemble a list of mass transit and road and highway projects to submit to the three county councils, and later to voters.

Even though they will be separate ballot measures, the Legislature has linked them. If the Sound Transit measure fails, then the roads measure fails, too.

The inclusion of Carlson is significant. Carlson and fellow KVI talk-show host Kirby Wilbur were instrumental in the campaign to repeal the 9.5-cent gas tax hike approved by the Legislature in 2005. Their effort failed.

Locke did not immediately return a call for comment Friday.

The Legislature raised the gas tax by 5 cents a gallon in 2003. Two years later, it approved another 9.5-cent hike, phased in over four years, as well as other fee increases. As a result, the state gas tax will rise by 3 cents a gallon on July 1, and by mid-2008 it will be 37.5 cents.

The two tax packages will pay for about \$12.7 billion in transportation projects, most of them in the central Puget Sound area.

But that isn't enough to finish some of the mega-projects in the region, particularly replacing the Alaskan

Way Viaduct in downtown Seattle, which will cost between \$2.8 billion and \$4.5 billion. The state will cover \$2 billion for the viaduct.

The three-county region is expected to come up with matching funds for that and other projects, including construction of Highway 704 across Fort Lewis and McChord Air Force Base between Frederickson and Lakewood.

Moreover, Sound Transit is about to embark on its second 10-year plan to expand light-rail and bus service in the region, which might include extending the light-rail line south from Sea-Tac Airport to Tacoma.