



## MEMORANDUM

TO: Okanogan Council of Governments

FROM: Thera Black, SCJ Alliance

DATE: May 6, 2019

SUBJECT: OCOG Primitive Roads Strategy Work Session

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### Purpose

The purpose of this work session is to discuss with OCOG members the approach we are pursuing for the Primitive Roads Strategy, share some early insights, and tap members' perspectives for insights and guidance as this work gets underway.

### Background

One of the priority actions identified by the Okanogan Council of Governments (OCOG) in the 2040 Regional Transportation Plan is a primitive roads strategy for the vast, unimproved roadway network that crisscrosses the region. That highly rural network is owned and managed by local, state, federal, and tribal governments, each with its own needs, definitions, standards, and protocols. Prior to this OCOG project, there has been no effort to improve consistency or coordination between these agencies. A copy of the project from the 2040 RTP is included in this packet.

As envisioned, this effort will result in a baseline network that functions seamlessly across agency boundaries and is based on agreed-upon definitions and standards, and measures to improve coordination and collaboration between agencies. Getting to that point entails compilation and reconciliation of various data sets from each agency, resolution of discrepancies and data gaps, and network analysis. It also entails extensive stakeholder engagement, initially among the land management agencies and then expanding to include various users of that rural network: emergency responders, ranchers and orchardists, outdoor enthusiasts, property owners, and others.

As the Regional Transportation Planning Organization for the region, OCOG is uniquely positioned to convene these diverse stakeholders. Early indications suggest a keen interest on the part of state and federal agencies in participating in this process. No similar effort has been conducted in Washington State though the need has been recognized since the wildfires of



2014 and 2015, if not earlier. OCOG's will be the first such plan in the state and one of the very few in the western United States.

SCJ Alliance was selected to develop the Primitive Roads Strategy for OCOG. We are pursuing this as a two-phased effort.

The first phase, which got underway in April, is a reconnaissance and scoping phase: collect and assemble data, engage the various land management agencies in developing a baseline understanding of existing conditions and identifying information or protocol gaps, establish a shared purpose and agenda among those agencies, and develop an implementation scope of work.

Phase 2, which will get underway after July 1, will execute that scope of work including securing the additional resources needed to augment OCOG funds for this work.

Your work session on May 13<sup>th</sup> is an opportunity for Board members to engage in this work at the outset. Your questions, ideas, and insights will be immensely valuable at this formative stage when we are still refining our approach to this original research effort.

#### Work Session Overview

At your work session on May 13<sup>th</sup> you'll have a chance to meet the SCJ project team. We'd like to talk through with you our approach to this project and share with you some early insights from our data collection and stakeholder engagement activities. We'd also like to talk with you about your own hopes and aspirations for this effort and tap your insights about stakeholder interests and engagement opportunities, potential funding opportunities, and any intersection this work might have with efforts in your own communities. Whenever possible we want this regional initiative to leverage local or stakeholder activities in order to generate more benefit for all. A copy of the stakeholder engagement strategy is attached.

We will also preview a new OCOG website with you at this work session. The website will provide a useful communication vehicle for this project and will have long-standing utility for OCOG beyond the life of this planning process.

## OCOG Primitive Roads Strategy

### Stakeholder Engagement Process

This brief outlines the stakeholder engagement process for the OCOG Primitive Roads Strategy. Stakeholder engagement is a foundation for successful outcomes of Phase 1 and Phase 2 work. For purposes of this brief, Phase 1 refers to scoping activities which will occur in SFY 2019 and Phase 2 refers to implementation activities and which will occur in SFY 2020 or later.

This brief lays out the overall approach for stakeholder engagement and then delineates specific activities in Phase 1. Phase 2 activities will be defined during Phase 1 scoping activities.

### *Project Objective*

Establish a unified network and management strategy for the unimproved primitive roads network in the Okanogan Region and which is coordinated and consistent across land management agencies in order to:

- Increase system resiliency
- Improve interagency coordination and collaboration
- Enhance safe and reliable access into Okanogan's backcountry for a wide array of system users including emergency management and response organizations, ranchers and orchardists, sporting and outdoor enthusiasts, and private property owners.
- Support cost-effective maintenance and management of the region's primitive roads network

Additional objectives may be developed during the scoping process.

### *Primitive Roads Context*

Primitive roads are a distinct category of transportation facilities. While definitions vary among different agencies, primitive roads are usually characterized as highly rural roads that are typically unpaved and/or are not designed or managed in accordance with standard paved roadways. They may be passable only by four-wheel drive or high clearance vehicles though at some times of the year they may not be passable at all.

Land management agencies (LMA) responsible for designating and managing the region's primitive roads include Okanogan County, the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, WA State Department of Natural Resources, WA State Parks, WA Department of Fish and Wildlife, Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, Pasayton National Wilderness, and the Ross Lake National Recreation Area. There may be others we have not yet identified.

Each LMA operates under its own set of rules and implementation guidance, developing its own plans and long-range policy and investment strategies. Every LMA area abuts areas designated and

managed by one or more different LMAs but no formal coordination or communication exists between these agencies. No complete inventory exists of all routes, and there is no indication of how well the roadway network of one agency aligns with the roadway network of the adjacent land management agency.

At a minimum, lack of coordination means missed opportunities that could have been realized with on-going collaboration, such as better coordination of maintenance activities that result in improved travel conditions for system users. Lack of coordination makes it hard for decision-makers to understand the fiscal or risk management implications of land use decisions in highly rural areas.

More importantly, though, this lack of coordination undermines the ability for emergency evacuations via primitive routes when paved routes are cut off due to fire. This is the situation the Methow Valley faced during the 2014 wildfires when firefighters fought to keep open SR 153, the only remaining paved route available for evacuation. Recent wildfires in California underscore the importance of route redundancy for emergency response and evacuation in dire circumstances. In the Okanogan, this means being able to rely upon its primitive road network when traditional paved routes are not an option.

We have been unable to find a similar primitive roads strategy such as this. We want to engage key stakeholders in helping to develop the scope of work to be sure it will address the right issues and fully support the intended uses.

### *Project Approach*

The OCOG Primitive Roads Strategy relies on two inter-related tracks: compilation of roadway and other data from each land management agency into a single reconciled data base to support analysis, and stakeholder engagement that includes land management agencies and other interests. The rest of this brief focuses on that stakeholder engagement.

### *Overall Stakeholder Approach*

Stakeholder engagement for the OCOG Primitive Roads Strategy is oriented around the different needs of two primary groups of interests:

- Local, tribal, state, and federal land management agencies
- System users, with a primary focus on emergency management interests but also considering other users like ranchers and orchardists, sporting and outdoor enthusiasts, and private property owners as well as the general public

Stakeholder engagement focuses initially on the land management agencies responsible for designating, owning, and maintaining their roadway networks. This is necessary to get a basic composite inventory and assessment of the primitive roads network and the issues and opportunities LMAs face in managing this system. This composite inventory and assessment

provide the foundation that allows expansion of the analysis to include the needs and interests of system users.

Accordingly, the project relies on select stakeholder engagement for Phase 1 activities. Phase 1 is an opportunity to take stock of the resources available from the LMAs in terms of data and analysis, identify data and resource gaps, and understand the differences in terminology and approach to primitive roads that each agency practices. Importantly, it is also an opportunity to engage key stakeholders in developing the implementation scope of work that will be the basis for Phase 2 activities. It is in Phase 2 that the stakeholder process will expand to include broader interests.

More details on the Phase 1 approach are outlined below. Phase 2 details will be developed during the Phase 1 scoping process.

### *Phase 1 Stakeholder Engagement*

#### **Initial Stakeholder Outreach (underway)**

Initial contact with each stakeholder is via one-on-one informational interviews conducted by phone or in person. This is an opportunity to introduce the project and obtain critical background information while also building stakeholder interest in the process. An interview guide ensures we are collecting similar core information from each participant while allowing us to probe for additional information or insights. This will also help us to efficiently identify the right point of contact for obtaining GIS and other data from each LMA. A summary of the initial outreach will provide beneficial background for the project team. A more polished recap will be prepared and shared with all the stakeholders when they convene for the first of two meetings.

#### **Stakeholder Meeting #1 (late May/early June))**

The first meeting will bring together the right representatives from each LMA. It will include the Okanogan County Department of Emergency Management; other emergency responders will be engaged in Phase 2.

At this meeting stakeholders will get an overview of the overall process, discuss potential issues and opportunities this study presents, and review preliminary insights from the available data that we have collected. We'll provide them with a preliminary, high-level outline of Phase 2 work efforts and engage them in fleshing out some of the key components. This will help us gauge whether we're generally on the right track with our thinking about implementation activities. Much of their focus will be directed to helping us identify and understand what we don't know but need to know, and institutional differences that will have to be reconciled (e.g. "primitive roads" definition).

Through these discussions we'll build on what we glean from the informational interviews. We'll look for intersections with their own LMA planning efforts and identify potential funding or other LMA resources that can support Phase 2 implementation work. We'll determine if there is a need for interagency agreements related to data sharing or coordination, and verify the compatibility of data access portals through different user systems. We'll also explore ideas about

stakeholder roles in Phase 2 including the potential need for a data-users group and identify any missing interests that should be included in that work. All of this will support preparation of a reasonable scope of work for developing and implementing the primitive roads strategy.

A summary recap of the work session will be prepared and distributed to the participants.

### **Stakeholder Meeting #2 (late June)**

We will convene the stakeholders for a second and final meeting before the end of June. At this meeting we will present to them a draft Phase 2 work plan for review and discussion, along with a more advanced compilation of the data set that will support that work. We expect that scope of work will address data collection and analysis, classification schemes and route prioritization, public engagement, inter-agency coordination and collaboration, and longer-term opportunities outside this scope of work. We anticipate being in a position to talk with them more fully about details of the Phase 2 stakeholder engagement process and the roles and responsibilities of different groups in that process. We will strive to get buy-in and start building champions for this effort beyond the OCOG to generate the resources and momentum for implementation activities. We will make any revisions to the draft Phase 2 scope of work that are warranted based on that review and feedback.

Note: We realize that we are asking for land management agency participation during what is peak season for some of these organizations. If, for some reason, we are unable to schedule two face-to-face meetings with this group before the end of June we will work to identify a conference video alternative. If such an alternative is necessary, then conducting the first meeting face-to-face and the second by video conference is preferable.

### **OCOG Briefings**

OCOG is itself a vitally important stakeholder group. We anticipate one work session during Phase 1 and a follow-up briefing in July or the earliest time after that.

At the first briefing we will outline our approach to the overall project and Phase 1 activities, present early insights from data compilation and stakeholder outreach to date, and engage members in a discussion about Phase 2 implementation activities. We will also roll out the OCOG website.

At the second meeting we will present an overview of the Phase 1 process and key findings, as well as the proposed work plan for Phase 2 implementation activities.

### *Phase 2 Stakeholder Engagement*

Details of the Phase 2 stakeholder engagement process will be developed during the Phase 1 scoping process but it is expected that Phase 2 engagement includes an expanded stakeholder advisory group(s) as well as targeted outreach to various user groups including municipalities, fire districts and emergency response organizations, orchardists and ranchers, outdoor enthusiasts, general public, and others.

## PRIMITIVE ROADS STUDY

*This work will enable a broad understanding of the primitive roads network that serves the Okanogan region, its characteristics, and key issues and opportunities associated with this uniquely rural element of the regional transportation system.*

Of the 1,376 miles of roads Okanogan County owns, 726 of those miles – 53 percent – are gravel roads. Of these, 571 miles are designated as Primitive Roads. Thousands of additional miles of Primitive Roads are owned by the Colville Tribes, the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, as well as the Bureau of Land Management, and the National Forest Service.

This **Primitive Roads Study** will establish the only comprehensive profile of the region’s primitive roads regardless of ownership, identifying in a searchable GIS database key characteristics and enabling coordinated mapping among agencies. Building on this baseline network the study will identify and evaluate measures to improve coordination and collaboration between agencies in managing this rural asset.

Primitive Roads are unpaved and they don’t adhere to standard street designs with which most people are familiar. They are not maintained on any kind of regular basis and at some times of the year they may be impassable. They are a uniquely rural category of roads and as such, are often dismissed in some circles as unimportant. Yet they play a vital role in the rural transportation system in terms of access to public lands, transport for resource-based industries, and emergency access and route redundancy.

In the introduction to the County Road Administration Board’s 2016 Gravel Roads Study, it’s noted:

*There is possibly nothing more representatively iconic of rural Washington State or, perhaps of rural America than is the simple line of an unstriped, unpaved road hugging the land contours as it stretches through large, open spaces and reaches towards a distant horizon...this kind of road is not just emblematic of the history of surface transportation in our state, but is very much a functioning part of the system as it exists today, and will remain an important part of it for many future years.*

Primitive roads serve a number of different purposes with wide-ranging expectations and constraints, and are governed by the policies of vastly different and independent agencies. This study will lay the foundation for a common understanding of this important component of the regional transportation system and potential strategies to improve management and coordination between agencies. It will assist in prioritizing some of these roads for preservation and maintenance as they serve vital roles in safety.

