

# Kitsap Complete Streets Leadership Forum: June 9, 2011

## Vulnerable Users

*Vicky Clarke*

“Vulnerable users” is an open ended phrase. We’re all vulnerable users of the transportation system, to varying degrees.

I’m young, healthy and athletic, but, on my occasional bicycle commute to work, when I reach the intersection where the shoulder drops off and there happens to be a huge truck about a foot to the left of me, even I feel pretty vulnerable.

But there are people in our community that are inherently vulnerable. The people who don’t come to public meetings, call us up and tell us what they want. They are on the fringes of society and almost invisible. But it is our responsibility to see them, and to understand them. And it is my role today, to shine a little light on them.

Seniors, children, people with physical and mental disabilities, and our homeless and low income community members are challenged by specific access issues.

I want to share with you today some information about these sectors of our community.

### Children

Of Kitsap’s +/- 251,000 residents, about 20% are school age. Around 37,000 children are currently enrolled in Kitsap public school system. Our society places enormous value on the safety of our children.

The Federal Safe Routes to Schools Program funds education programs and engineering projects that create safe walking and cycling routes within 2 miles of any elementary or middle school. Washington State has a similar program.

Engineering projects that provide safe routes to schools in Kitsap are one of 2 funding priorities for the non-motorized portion of Federal Transportation Funds distributed by the Kitsap Regional Council.

Every school child that lives more than 1 mile from school (unless there is no safe walking route for that 1 mile) receives state funding for school district bussing between school and school related activities.

School busses are the safest ground transportation in the country, literally stopping traffic for children. But journeying between school and home, either by bus or safe walking and cycling routes aren’t, and shouldn’t be, the only times that school children are our walking or cycling in their communities. And they, and their parents, should feel that it’s safe to do so.

### Seniors

At the opposite end of the age spectrum are seniors. The number of Kitsap’s residents 55 and over has doubled in the last decade. And is now around 20% of the total population. That number will continue to grow in coming years.

With growing age comes impairment of vision and hearing, slower reactions, and health conditions and medications that prohibit or recommend against driving.

The decision to give up driving is often seen as synonymous with giving up one's independence. It's hard. It's even harder when there are little or no apparent alternatives, such as walking, to getting to where we need to go –independently- within our communities.

Without that alternative we face an increase in the number of senior drivers on our roads. Senior drivers, who are statistically more likely to be involved in accidents, and also typically sustain worse injuries than a younger person would in the same type of accident.

### Homeless and Low Income Population

According to current estimates there are about 1500 homeless people in Kitsap County. Some sleep outside or in cars, others “couch-surf” at friends’ houses, and others sleep at temporary shelters.

The number of people on the brink of homelessness in the County is not known, and is obviously harder to track.

These members of our community need access to services that are typically located in Bremerton, but many of them live or are staying outside of Bremerton - often away from direct bus access. Many, of course, have no cars or cannot afford gas.

Most live or are staying outside of Bremerton, where the majority of our social service providers are located, and are in the rural areas where there is no direct bus access. Many of these members of our community have no cars or cannot afford gas, and thus rely on transit connections to reach jobs that don't necessarily correlate with typical commute patterns. Perhaps they work nights or swing-shifts.

### Physical and Mental Disability

Physical and mental disability crosses the boundaries of age and income bracket. A friend of mine recently spent a year on seizure medication that meant she couldn't drive. She was at once reliant on her husband, friends and the transit system. While on the surface she didn't “look disabled, her story illustrates the breadth of need in our community that isn't always in our faces and apparent.

As we create new roads, down-town areas and inter-community connections, or re-engineer existing facilities, we need to consider the needs of these users.

### Conclusion

The Federal classification of “vulnerable users” is a wider than children, seniors, low-income and disabled. Understanding the needs of these users is an ongoing conversation. What about the undocumented immigrants in our communities? Or those without English as a first language? What are their needs?

As we plan for Kitsap's multi-modal transportation plan, and continue planning and building transportation connections within and between our communities, I think we need to consider three things:

1. The interconnectivity of all modes. I'm not going to cycle 30 miles to Bremerton. But I can cycle to a bus stop, or drive to a park and ride from which there are good shoulders.
2. We need creative solutions. Whether that means expanding the use of Scoot cars or creating a bank of re-furbished bicycles that can be used on a temporary basis.
3. Many of our neighbors, our friends, our family members, need flexibility. Vulnerable users are not a minority of our population. In many cases, we are them, were them, or will be them.