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Sammamish's Ingress/Egress Failures and the Case for a Growth Moratorium

A Citizen's Analysis Exposing the City's Infrastructure, Safety, and Planning Realities

1. Introduction: The False Promise of Growth in Sammamish

On August 31, 1999, Sammamish became a newly incorporated city, promising its roughly 34,000 early residents more local control over planning and infrastructure.¹ Over two decades later, that pledge has proved hollow. The City Council is now pushing to add 4,000 new housing units—some of them in 12-story buildings—as part of a “Town Center” upzone intended to promote affordable housing and economic vibrancy. Despite lofty ideals, the cold facts reveal severe weaknesses in ingress/egress, public safety services, and fiscal capacity.

During its first ten years, Sammamish underwent intense residential development (thousands of homes added) without securing the funding or jurisdictional power to upgrade the main roads that funnel traffic off the plateau.² Residents who originally sought to escape congested urban areas now find themselves trapped in daily gridlock that can take 30 to 60 minutes just to reach Interstate 90 or SR-520. Concurrency failures, repeated budget shortfalls, and closures during major storm events indicate an infrastructure already at its breaking point—yet city leaders continue advocating for expansion. This paper offers a wake-up call: without a formal growth moratorium, Sammamish risks not only compounding daily traffic nightmares but jeopardizing residents' safety and well-being in emergencies.

2. The Core Issue: Limited Ingress/Egress and Severe Consequences

2.1 Geographic & Topographical Constraints

Only Two Major Exit Corridors. 228th Avenue SE leading south (eventually becoming SE 43rd Way to Issaquah) and Sahalee Way NE to the north (connecting with SR-202) remain the city's only high-volume routes off the plateau. Internal roads like 228th Avenue may be widened up to four lanes in some stretches, but they ultimately funnel into two-lane choke points outside city limits.³

Topographical Barriers. Sammamish is bounded by steep slopes, wetlands, and Lake Sammamish, making new roads or major expansions notoriously expensive and environmentally complex.⁴ Issaquah-Fall City Road improvements alone cost over \$50 million to widen just one segment in the southern part of the city.⁵ Similar large-scale improvements would be necessary on both the north and south ends to handle even the current traffic loads—an investment no one agency has committed to funding.

Jurisdictional Fragmentation. The city boundary excludes critical endpoints near SR-202 (Redmond or King County territory) and I-90 (Issaquah). As a result, Sammamish has no authority to unilaterally upgrade intersections at the crucial “last mile.” A \$16 million attempt

to widen Sahalee Way within city limits still fails to address the bottleneck exactly at the SR-202 intersection, controlled by another jurisdiction.⁶

2.2 Major Storm-Related Shutdowns (Including the 2024 Bomb Cyclone)

2024 Bomb Cyclone. In early 2024, a powerful “bomb cyclone” hammered Western Washington with extreme winds and heavy rain, as reported by *The Seattle Times* and *FOX 13 Seattle*.^{7 8} Sammamish experienced fallen trees and power lines that partially blocked both Sahalee Way and Issaquah-Pine Lake Road. Debris and icy conditions paralyzed traffic, underscoring the city’s precarious lack of alternate routes.

Above-Ground Power Lines and Debris Hazards. Most main roads in Sammamish have overhead lines susceptible to wind or falling branches during intense storms. Even a few hours of blockage can strand thousands of residents due to the minimal number of exit corridors.

Inescapable Consequence. Even those with 4WD/AWD vehicles are helpless if key roads are officially closed or physically obstructed. With no alternative high-volume routes, residents often discover that “any alternate path eventually reconnects to the same jammed arterials.”⁹

2.3 Liquefaction Risk in Earthquakes

The King County Hazard Mitigation Plan warns that SE 43rd Way (to I-90) and Sahalee Way (to SR-202) both lie in high liquefaction zones where water-saturated soils can destabilize under seismic shaking.¹⁰ If these roads fail simultaneously, tens of thousands could be cut off from medical help, supply lines, or evacuation routes. A significant landslide on Sahalee Way in 1982, triggered by heavy rain, demonstrated how quickly a single slope failure can sever an entire region’s main artery.¹¹ A moderate earthquake could replicate or magnify that damage on both ends.

3. Emergency Services & Medical Response Failures

3.1 No MEDIC Services Within City Limits

Eastside Fire & Rescue (EFR). While EFR operates local fire stations, they do not station paramedic (Advanced Life Support) teams in Sammamish.¹² ALS units with specialized equipment and advanced medications are instead based in Issaquah or Redmond, requiring precious travel time—often through congested or blocked roads—to respond.

Time-Critical Emergencies. A stroke, heart attack, or severe trauma often cannot wait the extra 15–30 minutes for paramedics to battle traffic. EFR data shows that in certain outlying neighborhoods (e.g., Trossachs in the southeast or Inglewood in the northwest), response times regularly exceed recommended windows.¹³ A single road blockage can dramatically worsen these delays.

3.2 Lack of Local Emergency Care Facilities

No Local Hospital or 24/7 Clinic. Residents requiring emergency care must reach Swedish Issaquah, Evergreen Redmond, or Overlake Bellevue, all located outside Sammamish. This reliance on external roads is perilous—especially at peak traffic times or during severe weather. City hazard plans highlight “heightened mortality risk” if main corridors close.¹⁴

“Waiting Game” in Major Storms. During the 2024 bomb cyclone, multiple ambulances were reported to have delayed arrival times when roads were partially blocked by debris.¹⁵ Even routine transports for chest pain or labor/delivery can be delayed or rerouted—raising serious questions about Sammamish’s capacity to protect its own residents in crisis.

3.3 Major Gas Pipeline Risk

High-Pressure Gas Pipeline. A north–south gas transmission line crosses the city parallel to 228th Avenue, carrying large volumes of natural gas at high pressure.¹⁶ An earthquake, landslide, or construction mishap could rupture this line, triggering catastrophic explosions or fires.

Mass Evacuation vs. Few Roads. Pipeline experts warn that a 1,000–2,000 foot evacuation radius might be needed if the pipeline ignites. With only two major exits, such an evacuation could devolve into chaos if traffic is already jammed or if one corridor is unusable. Sammamish’s emergency plan mentions pipeline disaster scenarios but offers no realistic solution for large-scale, rapid egress given current road limitations.¹⁷

4. Public Transportation: A False Hope

4.1 Denial of Additional Transit Services

Metro & Sound Transit Constraints. Despite multiple city requests, transit agencies have declined to significantly boost service beyond the existing routes on 228th Avenue, citing low projected ridership and the city’s challenging topography. A 2018 King County Metro feasibility study, for example, examined extending Route 269 or 554 further into Sammamish but concluded it was not cost-effective given low density, hilly terrain, and limited land for expanded park-and-ride lots.¹⁸

4.2 Geographical Barriers to Viable Bus Service

Steep Grades and Spread-Out Development. Much of Sammamish’s layout—especially the proposed Town Center area located on a steep grade—is poorly suited to standard bus routing. King County Metro typically avoids sustained slopes above 7–8%, yet portions of SE 4th Street approach 10%.¹⁹ Moreover, single-family neighborhoods are often too far from major corridors for year-round walking, particularly in rainy or icy conditions.²⁰

4.3 Behavioral Factors and Limited Park-and-Ride Capacity

Car-Oriented Lifestyle. Surveys indicate that over 80% of Sammamish residents prefer commuting by private vehicle, partly due to the lack of convenient, direct bus routes to major job centers.²¹ Even if bus service were expanded, flexible schedules for families (child drop-offs, varied work hours) and errand-running still heavily favor car travel.

Two Small Park-and-Ride Lots. Sammamish has two officially designated Park-and-Ride facilities:

- One near 228th Avenue NE & Inglewood Hill Road, which often sees capacity issues due to limited spaces and shared usage.
- Another at 228th Avenue SE & Issaquah-Pine Lake Road, also relatively small and prone to filling up quickly.

Both facilities combined do not provide enough spaces for a robust “park-and-ride” commuting model, especially compared to larger suburban transit hubs in Issaquah or Redmond.²² Previous discussions to build a bigger Park-and-Ride in Town Center have stalled due to high land costs and developer pushback, leaving limited options for bus riders who cannot walk or bike to 228th.²³ In practice, most residents find it more straightforward to drive directly to external job centers—contributing to the intense peak-hour congestion on the two main exit corridors.

5. Overcrowded Schools & Student Transportation Woes

5.1 School Capacity at or Beyond Limits

Skyline & Eastlake Overload. Skyline High (Issaquah School District) was built for ~1,800 students but currently enrolls over 2,300, leading to portable classrooms and hallway crowding.²⁴ Eastlake High (Lake Washington School District) similarly hovers near capacity. Multiple bond measures to fund a new high school have failed to secure the 60% supermajority required.²⁵

Elementary and Middle Schools in Portables. Beaver Lake Middle, Pine Lake Middle, and several elementary schools near 228th rely on multiple portables. Some expansions are planned but do not keep pace with the city’s anticipated housing growth.²⁶

5.2 Off-Plateau Student Commutes

Tesla STEM High and Private Schools. Hundreds of Sammamish teens attend specialized programs in Redmond or private institutions in Bellevue/Seattle. These students (and their parents) depend on the same overburdened roads to leave the plateau—particularly in the early morning.²⁷ Morning peak traffic often merges with school rush, amplifying backups on 228th Avenue or Sahalee Way.

Implications for Growth. Each new subdivision may bring additional families whose children further overload local schools or must travel off-plateau. Development boosters often claim “mixed-use” communities will reduce school traffic; yet historically, new residents still require the same public school facilities, many of which are already at capacity.

5.3 Impact on Future Growth

Unfunded School Sites. Even if new housing developments earmark land for schools, district budgets remain inadequate to construct full campuses—especially at high-school scale.²⁸ Without large-scale state aid or successful local bonds, schools will continue

stretching capacity with portables and redrawn boundaries. This adds yet another quality-of-life issue that large-scale development would worsen.

6. Economic Reality: The Myth of Local Employment Opportunities

6.1 Unrealistic Commercial Prospects

High Business Turnover. Town Center's existing retail spaces experience rapid turnover, with owners citing high rent and limited foot traffic (weekday foot traffic is minimal because most residents commute elsewhere). Businesses that thrive in dense urban centers seldom fare well in a commuter suburb with few tourists or full-day shoppers.

Wage vs. Housing Costs. Service-industry wages rarely approach Sammamish's median home price. Consequently, employees of new shops or restaurants would commute from outside the plateau—adding yet more vehicle trips rather than reducing them.

6.2 Commuter Culture Endures

Lopsided Jobs-to-Housing Ratio. Despite City Hall's hope for a self-contained community, ~85% of Sammamish's working adults are employed in Redmond, Bellevue, Seattle, or further.²⁹ Any modest increase in local office or retail space fails to address the fundamental mismatch between the city's upscale housing and the location of high-paying tech/professional jobs.

Town Center Illusions. Conceptual drawings show vibrant walkable blocks and offices above retail. In practice, the city's concurrency failures, minimal transit, and limited commercial viability hamper this utopian vision. After 10 years, Town Center's development remains fragmented, with prime parcels still vacant or subject to repeated permitting disputes.

7. Legal and Ethical Concerns: Concurrency, Potential Fraud, and Manipulated Data

7.1 Concurrency Failures under the GMA

"Paper Fixes" vs. Real Solutions. Under Washington's Growth Management Act (GMA), cities must ensure new development does not exceed transportation capacity.³⁰ Yet Sammamish has repeatedly "fixed" concurrency on paper by listing future road expansions—knowing full well that external agencies (Redmond, Issaquah) control the most critical segments.

Past Legal Battles. Residents have filed appeals with the state Growth Management Hearings Board, alleging that Sammamish's concurrency standards were watered down to let new projects pass.³¹ Some suits pointed to city staff overriding traffic engineer objections or using unrealistic assumptions about trip generation. If proven, this raises serious questions about ethical governance.

7.2 Lowering of Standards for Development Approval

Exempting Failing Corridors. In one instance, East Lake Sammamish Parkway was officially labeled “exempt” from concurrency failures in 2018, even though the city’s own data showed it operating beyond capacity.³² This political maneuver effectively enabled continued home construction without addressing real congestion.

Public Distrust. Citizen activists warn that developers wield outsized influence over council decisions. While no formal corruption convictions have emerged, the pattern of concurrency “loopholes” and indefinite “promise lists” for road improvements fosters a perception of backroom deals.³³

8. Financial and Infrastructure Failures: Who Pays for This?

8.1 Budget Shortfalls & Potential Tax Hikes

Limited Commercial Tax Base. Unlike neighboring Redmond or Issaquah, Sammamish relies heavily on property taxes from single-family homes. Proposed expansions to retail/office space in Town Center have not materialized at scale.³⁴ As a result, the city struggles with recurring deficits, with repeated discussions of raising utility or property taxes just to maintain current services (police contracts, road maintenance, parks).³⁵

\$50+ Million Road Upgrades (Each). Estimations for fully upgrading the south corridor (SE 43rd Way, Issaquah-Pine Lake Rd) or the north corridor (Sahalee Way to SR-202) each exceed tens of millions in cost.³⁶ Issaquah-Fall City Road, a smaller project, already surpassed \$50 million. Patching or widening smaller segments offers minimal congestion relief if outside jurisdictions do not also expand.

8.2 Multi-Jurisdictional Roadblocks

Dependency on Redmond/Issaquah/King County/WSDOT. A fully functional fix to Sahalee Way requires improvements at SR-202, which is under Redmond/WSDOT. Similarly, 228th/SE 43rd Way merges into Issaquah territory near I-90. Without those cities’ cooperation—and huge state/federal grants—Sammamish’s main choke points cannot be resolved.

Politically Unpopular Bond Measures. Even if Sammamish tried to self-fund major expansions, voter-approved bonds would be required. But many current residents balk at footing the bill for expansions meant to accommodate future growth. Past attempts at regional partnerships have stalled or languished in concept phases.

8.3 Ten-Year Minimum Window

Even if external funding magically appeared, major road expansions take years for design, environmental review, right-of-way acquisition, and construction. Realistically, “shovel-ready” status for expansions at both ends might be a decade away, leaving a 10-year gap where roads become progressively worse as more residents move in under the city’s growth push.

9. The Case for an Immediate Growth Moratorium

9.1 Legal Basis under the GMA

When concurrency fails or critical safety issues arise, cities can—and should—halt growth until infrastructure catches up. Sammamish has used this tool before, imposing a development moratorium in 2017–2018 after roads officially fell below concurrency standards.³⁷ The city reversed it upon pledges of future projects, yet those projects remain largely unfunded.

9.2 Protecting Current Residents

Adding up to 4,000 more households, each generating 8–10 vehicle trips daily, will overwhelm an already failing system. The daily inconvenience alone is unacceptable, but the risk of life-threatening emergencies—whether a wildfire, pipeline rupture, or earthquake—makes continued growth reckless. Citizens who purchased homes decades ago believed Sammamish would remain a quiet, safe suburb; they now watch road expansions stall while developers push for even denser housing.

9.3 No Feasible Solutions in Sight

State or federal grants of the magnitude needed to solve plateau egress issues are not even prioritized regionally. Collaboration with Issaquah, Redmond, and King County has produced only incremental improvements (like adaptive signal timing) but not the wholesale expansions or new arterial routes needed. Meanwhile, budget constraints, topographical barriers, and local political gridlock leave no short-term fixes on the horizon.

9.4 Moral Imperative

City officials extol family values and sustainability while ignoring the fundamental lack of safe roads, paramedic coverage, or adequate school capacity. Luring thousands more families into an environment that cannot handle basic emergency or educational needs borders on negligence. By reinstating a strict moratorium, Sammamish would force all stakeholders—developers, county/state agencies, and current residents—to confront these realities. Without such firm action, the cycle of partial solutions and empty promises will continue to degrade quality of life for everyone.

Conclusion

Sammamish's dream of a balanced, thriving community is collapsing under the weight of inadequate ingress/egress, shaky emergency services, overcrowded schools, and politically manipulated concurrency standards. Despite repeated warnings—from hazard planners to traffic engineers—City Council leadership clings to an idealized vision of growth that ignores the severe, documented risks. When roads fail in storms—such as the 2024 bomb cyclone—or paramedics cannot arrive in time, the tragic consequences fall on unsuspecting residents.

This paper is a clarion call: Stop the growth until infrastructure, safety, and emergency response are substantially addressed. The current path gambles with public safety and undermines the city's own standards of livability. Citizens deserve a future where roads are

passable, schools are not bursting at the seams, and ambulances can arrive swiftly—even during a crisis. Sammamish must enact a new moratorium on large-scale development and demand real, funded solutions in partnership with neighboring jurisdictions. Anything less betrays the people who believed in the promise of a well-planned city atop the plateau.

Footnotes

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