Proposed Cross-Base Highway to bisect wildlife area and destroy Audubon Springs.

In the late 1990s, the state highway department proposed building a four lane highway through a wildlife area known locally as Audubon Springs. For $600 million the highway would save six minutes in travel time between Spanaway and the Interstate Five overpass at the town of Tillicum. Two highway bridges would be built over Audubon Springs. The four lane highway would create a barrier to wildlife migration from an 800 acre forested region to the prairie of Fort Lewis Army Base. The 800 acre refuge contained four state listed Wildlife Species Of Concern.

Audubon Springs is part of a chain of wetlands and lakes that contribute to an Important Bird Area and are a popular wildlife viewing area on Fort Lewis. The initial Environmental Impact Statement for the road proposal failed to identify several Species Of Concern because the hired consultants consistently looked for the species in the wrong season of the year. The EIS-proposed mitigation for the Western Gray Squirrel was an expensive bridge over the highway, which would have increased predation of the squirrel and not solved the problem of all the other species abandoned in an isolated habitat.

Tahoma Audubon found partners in the Woodbrook Hunt Club and Conservation Northwest. Together they brought a successful lawsuit against the state halting the project until a new Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) could be written. The Stay Agreement stipulated that no additional links to the highway could be built without completing a more comprehensive EIS that included adequate mitigation for the wildlife.

In 2017 the state Department of Transportation proposed widening Interstate 5 and improving the Tillicum Overpass on Interstate 5. The new exchange would be large enough to accommodate the addition of a Cross Base Highway.

With our partners, Audubon members wrote a joint letter to the state Secretary of Transportation pointing out the limits of the Stay Agreement and of the state Environmental Policy Act, requiring an EIS for all portions of a new highway project before any new section can be completed.

In a negotiating session with the Secretary and his staff, the three partners agreed not to sue the state or delay the Interstate 5 widening project if the state would rescind the Record of Decision for the Cross-Base Highway.
This agreement allowed the state to proceed with widening Interstate 5 and to construct the Tillicum Interchange as proposed. The agreement also eliminated the ability of the state legislature to allocate funds for the Cross-Base Highway. Without the previous Record of Decision, the legislature would have to raise funding to redesign the Cross-Base highway, reconsider the need for the highway, re-evaluate the impact on wildlife then propose mitigation for the roads its impact on wildlife in the vicinity of Audubon Springs.

This issue took two decades to resolve and the negotiation skills of some great partners who held their coalition together until the end.