

...Public hearing on I-5 Bridge options Jan. 22

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and reduce congestion, on-ramps and off-ramps would be widened and lengthened at six interchanges: SR 500, Mill Plain Boulevard, SR 14, Hayden Island, Marine Drive, and Columbia Boulevard.

It would be the biggest Portland-area public construction project in a generation. Early estimates say the project would take five years to construct and would cost \$3.1 to \$4.2 billion.

State transportation planners are hoping the federal government will pick up 60 percent or more of the total cost, with the remainder to come from state and local government budgets, and revenues from a high-tech toll system. Union officials say, realistically, the federal government likely will pick up between 25 to 30 percent of the cost.

While the project's price tag is enormous, federal, state and local leaders say that doing nothing is an unacceptable option.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, U.S. Deputy Transportation Secretary Thomas Barrett and Federal Highway Administrator J. Richard Capka toured the I-5 Bridge and the area surrounding it last year.

"Something obviously needs to be done. It is important to get the new bridge built," Peters said during her visit in October.

Columbia River Crossing staff have shown a preference for a replacement bridge with light rail, but the task force hasn't ruled out several other alternatives. Two proposals would keep the existing bridge and build a smaller new bridge as a supplement. That might save \$170 million to \$590 million in

the short run, but wouldn't solve many of the problems of the old bridge, and would make maritime shipping more hazardous. And one proposal would include the new bridge but have a dedicated lane for buses rather than light rail.

Vancouver Mayor Royce Pollard and Oregon Congressman Earl Blumenauer have said they oppose any option that doesn't include light rail.

Finally, some members of the public oppose any bridge improvement at all, arguing that reducing congestion will make it easier to drive, which is bad for the environment.

Local building trades union officials, however, are solidly in support of the new bridge with light rail alternative.

The project would require payment of prevailing wage rates, leaving union-

signatory contractors in a good position to bid on the work. Thus the project would mean years of employment for hundreds of union building trades workers in Oregon and Southwest Washington.

Dave Tischer, business manager for Laborers Local 320 and a member of the task force representing the Columbia Pacific Building Trades Council, is encouraging union members — especially those whose commute takes them across the Interstate Bridge — to come out to the task force's Jan. 22 public meeting to show support for the project. At the meeting, which takes place from 4 to 8 p.m. at the Vancouver Hilton, task force members will also hear a presentation about tolling.

Tolls paid for both phases of the existing bridge. The first toll, five cents,

was levied from 1917 to 1929. The second, 20 cents for cars and more for trucks, was levied from 1960 to 1966. It's not clear how much the toll would have to be now, but it will be more than 20 cents. Fortunately, new electronic tolling technologies exist that would enable drivers to pay a toll without slowing or stopping.

The Columbia River Crossing Task Force is expected to finalize its recommendation by August, at which point WSDOT, ODOT, and local governments and transit agencies will have a chance to formally endorse the project, which would then seek federal funding from several sources. Contracts could go out for bid as early as late 2009, and construction could begin as early as 2010, though 2011 is a more likely start date.

I-5 Bridge can't handle traffic

The existing I-5 bridge actually consists of two side-by-side three-lane bridges, completed in 1917 and 1958. They're just too small to handle the existing demand — 135,000 vehicles a day, a number which includes 10,000 to 30,000 trucks. On weekdays, traffic congestion — defined as traffic moving 30 miles per hour or less — averages six hours a day.

On- and off-ramps in the project area are shorter than usual, and the bridge's 11-foot-wide lanes are a foot smaller than standard. As a result, accidents along the five-mile stretch are twice as frequent as on comparable stretches of highway. And because it has no safety shoulders, accidents on the bridge back up traffic for up to an hour. The bridge is also too low for tug boats to pass when the river level is high, so a lift span in the center must be raised an average of once a day for river traffic. The lift span takes 10 minutes to go up and down, and it too can lead to hour-long traffic backups.

All told, the five-mile span between State Route 500 in Vancouver and Columbia Boulevard in Portland is the worst congestion bottleneck of any stretch on I-5 — a 1,381-mile-long highway that runs from the Canadian border to Tijuana. Congestion has a major impact on commuters, and makes freight commerce more costly; regionwide, trucking companies time the shipment of goods to avoid being on I-5 in Portland during rush hour.

Lastly, the existing bridge is not up to modern seismic standards, and would likely collapse in the event of a major earthquake. The eastern span — the one built in 1917 that now carries north-bound traffic — is held in the river by 60-foot wooden pilings made of Douglas fir.

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