

Task force favors I-5 Bridge replacement

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

VANCOUVER — Replacing the I-5 Interstate Bridge — and extending the TriMet light rail line to Vancouver — are now the clear choice of a 39-member task force that has been studying how to relieve the Interstate Bridge traffic bottleneck.

Columbia River Crossing, as the task force is known, was formed to make a recommendation to the Washington and Oregon transportation departments. The Columbia-Pacific Building and Construction Trades Council has a voice on the task force in the person of Laborers Local 320 Business Manager Dave Tischer.

At its Jan. 22 meeting, Columbia River Crossing took a kind of straw poll.

"I think it's high time we move forward with this," Tischer told fellow task force members, declaring the building trades' preference for light rail and a replacement bridge.

Not one task force member spoke in favor of other options that were being considered. Those options included: doing nothing at all; keeping the existing pair of bridges for northbound traffic and adding a supplemental bridge to carry southbound traffic; and adding bus-only lanes instead of light rail.

Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski and Washington Gov. Christine Gregoire had announced their preference for the replacement bridge option in a press statement the week before.

At the Jan. 22 meeting, task force members heard reports from Columbia River Crossing staff about the project's environmental impacts, and about a proposal for tolling to help pay for the project, which also includes work on six nearby highway interchanges.

As laid out by staff, the toll would be collected electronically. Bridge users would get a transponder to place on their windshield, which would be read by roadside radio equipment; the toll would then be debited from the user's account. Vehicles without a transponder would have their license plates photographed and would be charged a surcharge, getting a bill in the mail.

The toll would vary by time of day: For passenger cars, it would start at \$2.56 each way during morning and evening peak travel times (6 to 10 a.m. and 3 to 7 p.m.); \$1.92 between peaks and an hour before and after; and \$1.28 from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. Those figures are in 2017 dollars and are a very rough estimate based on estimated construction costs and the assumption that tolling would pay about one-third of the cost of the overall project, including the work on the interchanges. The bridge itself accounts for about a third of the estimated \$3.1 to \$4.2 billion cost of the overall project.

For peak hour commuters crossing five days a week, tolls would add up to about \$110 a month for starters. The toll

would rise with inflation and could continue for 30 to 40 years.

The task force also heard about 45 minutes of public testimony. Several union members were among those testifying, including former IBEW Local 48 business manager Ed Barnes, who served on a precursor task force. Barnes warned that if only the new I-5 bridge charges a toll, traffic — and congestion — will shift to the I-205 bridge. Barnes proposed putting tolls on both spans to head off that problem.

The next step in the process is the late February release of a Draft Environmental Impact Statement required by federal law. The statement will be about 3,000 pages long, and the public will have 60 days to comment on it by mail or email, or in person at hearings to be scheduled in Portland and Vancouver. Thus far, it looks like the project would have no major negative environmental impact, and may have a positive impact in some ways, by reducing emissions associated with the idling engines of vehicles stuck in traffic.

But that hasn't satisfied some environmental activists and others, both on and off the task force, who have questioned the wisdom and expense of building a 12-lane bridge as the petroleum age enters its twilight.

"We should build it for the world we think we're going to be living in," testified Joe Cortright, a former economist for the State of Oregon.

"It sets a bad precedent that a project of this size ignores climate change," said task force member Jill Fuglister, who is co-director of the Coalition for a Livable Future.

Some argued that the additional lanes will only encourage people to drive, and thus will fill up after the bridge is open. On the other hand, state transportation planners point to the bridge's light rail component and the likelihood of tolling as likely to reduce congestion.

Also controversial among commenters was the question of where to put the light rail tracks on the Vancouver side. Some favor Main Street as the location most likely to increase ridership, and predict it will stimulate transit-oriented development as it has in Portland. But some small business owners voiced fears about the disruption, and favor an alignment next to I-5.

About 120 people attended the Jan. 22 meeting; about half of those testifying were critical, but most attendees seemed to support the bridge.

No local elected leaders are standing in the way of the bridge, but seeing some citizen opposition, building trades union leaders have been encouraging members — particularly members who use the I-5 Interstate Bridge — to come to meetings and testify in favor of building a new one. A schedule of upcoming community meetings is available at the task force web site, www.columbiarivercrossing.org.



'A Job Well Done'

VANCOUVER — Ed Barnes, a retired business manager and 35-year member of Electrical Workers Local 48, was honored at a reception Jan. 23 for his service on the Washington State Transportation Commission.

More than 75 people attended, including Vancouver Mayor Royce Pollard and various politicians and union officials. Several speakers praised Barnes as "a champion of transportation in the state of Washington." Letters of commendation "for a job well done" were read from U.S. Senators Patti Murray and Marie Cantwell, U.S. Rep. Brian Baird and Gov. Chris Gregoire.

Barnes served three terms (12 years is the limit) on the commission under appointments from three governors. "I'm proud to have served," he said. "But I'll tell you, it made me most proud when I got a unanimous confirmation from the Senate."

Barnes has been a stalwart on transportation issues in both Washington and Oregon — be it roads, bridges, freight trains, ferry boats, buses, you name it.

"Ed Barnes has been a real important figure for transportation in this state," said Transportation Commission Chair Christopher Ford, who later presented Barnes with a wall clock and resolution of commendation.

Washington State Transportation Secretary Paula Hammond said Barnes not only offered great leadership and advice to her; he was a cheerleader for DOT employees. "He would always thank the workers and tell them what a great job they were doing," she said.

Port of Vancouver Commissioner Nancy Baker (photo right) also presented Barnes with a framed resolution on behalf of the Port for his work.

To cap off the evening, the Columbia River Sweet Adelines Chorus (above) serenaded Barnes with a medley of songs. Luanne Barnes, Ed's wife, is a member of the chorus.

Term limits require Ed Barnes to step down from Washington State Transportation Commission



LERC 30th anniversary party March 7

The Labor Education and Research Center of the University of Oregon is planning a 30th anniversary celebration Friday, March 7, at the Oregon Convention Center in Portland. (The NW Labor Press incorrectly reported the date as March 30 in the Jan. 19 issue.)

Gov. Ted Kulongoski has been invited to speak, along with UO President Dave Frohnmayer and Ruth Milkman, director of the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.

A reception and dinner are scheduled for 6 to 9 p.m. Preceding the dinner from 2 to 5 p.m. will be a symposium entitled, "Creating La-

bor-Community Alliances That Work."

The Oregon Legislature established LERC in 1977 as a way to provide education and research to workers. At the UO campus in Eugene and at the Portland Center downtown, LERC offers classes and conducts research in the fields of occupational safety and health, technological changes, special concerns for women and minority workers, and a range of issues linked to collective bargaining and labor-management relations.

At the March 7 anniversary, LERC will launch its new Strategic Training and Action Research

(STAR) Fund. Net proceeds from the event will benefit the fund, which will be used in part to provide more training programs and to bring visiting union leaders to Oregon.

Donations to the STAR Fund are tax deductible and range from \$100 to \$5,000. A \$5,000 "Visionary" contribution includes 16 anniversary dinner tickets and recognition in the dinner program. A \$100 "Activist" contribution includes a dinner ticket and recognition in the dinner program. Individual dinner tickets are \$60 each.

For more information about the anniversary dinner and/or the STAR Fund, call LERC at 541-346-5054.