

Conditions are attached

Government agencies okay bridge plan... but

Over the past month, five government agencies have passed resolutions supporting construction of a new Interstate 5 bridge over the Columbia River between Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Washington.

Approval by the Portland City Council, Vancouver City Council, Metro, TriMet and C-Tran are crucial because any one agency could kill the project if they were to oppose it. Their support now, however, doesn't mean the bridge will be built. It merely moves it from phase one to phase two in the planning process.

A 39-member Columbia River Crossing (CRC) task force has recommended to the Oregon Department of Transportation and the Washington Department of Transportation a "locally preferred alternative" that calls for replacing the aging lift-span bridge with a "seismically sound" new bridge that includes light rail, and bicycle and pedestrian access. Additionally, the project would rebuild seven interchanges and add merging lanes between State Route 500 in Vancouver to Victory Blvd., in Portland.

Public agencies, businesses, labor, civic organizations, neighborhoods and freight, commuter and environmental groups were represented on the CRC task force, which met 23 times between February 2005 and June 2008 before making its recommendation.

Cost for the project is pegged at \$4.2 billion and is to be funded by a mix of federal, state and local money, including bridge tolls.

Each of the government agencies passed resolutions supporting a new bridge with light rail and bicycle access. [Metro's vote was held after this edition went to press, but it was expected to pass.] However, with each agency's stamp of approval came pages of conditions that each would like to see implemented during the second phase of planning. Key among the conditions are: 1) the design and number of lanes to be built; 2) the impact on the environment; and 3) who

will pay for it, and how much.

Building trades union officials and members attended most of the public hearings, where they provided testimony in support of a new bridge with light rail and bike lanes.

"Three years of hard work has gone into this already," said Lynn Lehrbach of Teamsters Joint Council No. 37 in testimony before the Portland City Council on July 9. Lehrbach was one of 79 people to speak.

"The feds are on board. Both states are on board. If we don't do this now, we will miss out on a very important opportunity. If not now, when will we do it? And what will the cost be then?" Lehrbach asked.

Joe Esmonde, speaking on behalf of the Columbia Pacific Building and Construction Trades Council, said any delays could set the project back 10 years or more. "It's the right project at the right time for our region," he said.

Supporters of the replacement bridge say the region is well positioned politically to get federal dollars for most of the light rail project, as well as a good portion of the highway and interchange work. The I-5 bridge is a major West Coast freight thoroughfare, and fixing the bottleneck at the bridge is listed as a high priority by the U.S. Department of Transportation.

Statewide and locally, bridge tolls and gas tax increases are on the table.

Portland City Council supports a CRC recommendation that would impose tolls before the new bridge is even built, while Vancouver City Council opposes tolls altogether.

TriMet and Portland favor a bridge with six total through lanes, while the CRC plan endorses as many as 12 lanes. Vancouver City Council backed a "stacked transit" option that would eliminate a third span for light rail tracks.

These and other issues will be discussed as phase two moves forward.

"If a new bridge is built, it is built with no more through lanes than exist right now," said Portland Mayor-elect Sam Adams, who is a city commissioner in charge of transportation. The I-5 bridge currently has three through lanes running both north and south.


Adams said Portland has leverage in the final product design. "The potential exists, the raw materials exist, the good will exists to really make a bridge that we can be proud of," he said. "But if this doesn't live up to its promise, if this doesn't live up to our expectations, we can stop this."

Portland commissioners all agreed that building the bridge should be done with local workers and contractors.

Use of apprenticeship programs and women and minority-owned contractors "is of fundamental importance

to me," said Commissioner Nick Fish.

"This is a need, it has to be done anyway, but it also creates great jobs and wealth for working-class people in our community," said Commissioner Randy Leonard. "I can't imagine the circumstances under which it should not happen."



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