

# New life for a replacement I-5 bridge over the Columbia River

VANCOUVER, Wash.— Some Southwest Washington legislators, transportation officials, union officials, small business owners, and political and community activists met June 22 in an effort to breathe new life into replacing the aging and congested Interstate 5 lift-span bridges that connect Portland and Vancouver.

The meeting was coordinated by the I-5 Bridge Replacement Group, an organization formed more than three years ago by members of the Labor Roundtable of Southwest Washington to thank supporters of the defunct Columbia River Crossing (CRC) project. But the group never stopped trying to build community consensus for a replacement bridge.

The need for the project hasn't changed. And the need to do something hasn't changed, said Bob Schaefer, a former state legislator from Clark County and a co-founder of the group.

"We've got all the background. We've got all the studies. We need to have dialogue to build consensus on a project that can move forward, and still provide a benefit that everyone needs," Schaefer told the Labor Press.

The group has now focused its attention on getting replacement of the I-5 bridge designated as a "project of statewide significance" in both Washington and Oregon. Doing so would allow the construction permitting process to be expedited.

Earlier this year, the Washington Legislature passed a bill that directs the Washington Department of Transportation (WDOT) to review and document all of the work that went into the planning of the CRC. The purpose is to give lawmakers some idea as to what work is still valid, what work needs to be re-done, and what might be the best path forward to replace the I-5 bridge.

Senate Bill 5806 requires WDOT to report its findings to the Washington Legislature by Dec. 1 — along with a recommendation as to whether it should be designated as a project of statewide significance.

Additionally, the bill calls for creation of a 16-member legislative action committee comprised of lawmakers from Washington and Oregon, with the first meeting to be held no later than Dec. 15, 2017. Washington lawmakers allocated \$350,000 to conduct the work.



Snarled traffic on the Interstate 5 Bridge is a daily occurrence.

Whether Oregon lawmakers will get on board is still not clear. The Oregon Legislature wraps up its 2017 session on July 10.

The I-5 Bridge Replacement Group invited Kris Strickler, regional administrator for WDOT, to its meeting June 22 to discuss what needs to happen in order to get an I-5 replacement bridge "shovel-ready."

Attending the meeting were Washington state Sen. Annette Cleveland (who drafted SB 5806), state Rep. Sharon Wylie, a representative for U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, Vancouver Mayor pro-tem Anne McEnerny-Ogle, Matt Ransom, executive director of the Regional Transportation Council, union officials from Teamsters, Carpenters, Laborers, and the Southwest Washington Central Labor Council, two representatives from the Cowlitz Indian Tribe, and others.

Before it was scrapped in 2014, the CRC had secured all of the necessary permits to begin construction — including an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and hard-to-get permits from the Coast Guard and Federal Aviation Administration.

Any replacement bridge going forward, Strickler said, would have to get new permits or refresh old permits for all of the work — but not necessarily

from scratch.

"If we have one project that applied for a permit and received a permit, and that project changes, we do have to go back and get those permits again," he said. "It doesn't mean you start from ground zero. What it means is, you start from the point where the change occurs and you have that discussion with those resource agencies."

Strickler said all of the previous technical work on the CRC

"was based on solid foundation by solid experts from multiple agencies." He acknowledged, however, that the process to renew or refresh the permits will take a significant amount of effort and time—possibly two or three years.

And there is no doubt a new bridge project will have changes. The failed CRC included a five-mile stretch of freeway, multiple interchanges and light-rail extension, in addition to a single bridge with six through lanes (three lanes North, and three lanes South) and four auxiliary lanes. [The current I-5 bridge is actually two bridges. The northbound bridge is 100 years old. The southbound bridge was built in 1958. Both are liftspans, and both have three lanes.]

It came with a price tag of \$3.6 billion.

The federal government had committed to pick up the \$850 million cost for light rail, so long as Oregon and Washington each ponied up \$450 million. The remainder of the financing was to come from tolls.

In 2013, the Democrat-con-

trolled Oregon Legislature approved spending \$450 million. But in Washington, Republican state Sens. Don Benton of Vancouver and Ann Rivers of La Center blocked a bill that would have allocated its portion of the financing. Had the bill got to the floor, it would have passed.

The following year, Oregon's then-Gov. John Kitzhaber, a Democrat, tried to go it alone with a scaled-down bridge project. In the 2014 short session of the Legislature, HB 4113 had majority support in the House, but not in the Senate. When the session adjourned without a bill, the Oregon Department of Transportation officially shut down the project.

Federal funding went away, and not much has been done since 2014.

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