

# SW transportation committee hears from state regarding I-5 projects

By Kate Bennett  
Special to The Southwest Portland Post

At the November SW Neighborhoods, Inc. (SWNI) Transportation Committee meeting, six Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) employees spoke about their plans for two transportation projects in Southwest Portland. The first project involves safety improvements along Barbur/99W and I-5 (Exit 294). The second project concerns the I-5 Iowa Viaduct.

Dennis Mitchell, Region 1 ITS/Traffic Engineer, addressed the first project. With an enlarged Google map of the particular area posted to the blackboard, Mitchell discussed how 99W is always congested at this intersection, especially when there is an accident on I-5. He claimed that ODOT is "thinking about widening this section (on 99W) to three lanes" and wants "to clean up the entrance to this large intersection."

Various committee members voiced their own concerns about the intersection. For example, Multnomah representative Kay Durtschi remarked that a lot of accidents happen in that intersection because drivers think that they are on a ramp to the highway, rather than realizing that they are on a street.

Glenn Bridger, a Hillsdale representative, asked whether the proposed safety plans would affect the new bus shelter on 99W. Mitchell stated, "We don't anticipate anything happening to the bus shelter."

Committee member and Hillsdale Neighborhood Association president Don Baack complained about the faint crosswalk markings and wondered about the possibility of zebra-stripe pedestrian markings.

When Mitchell explained that new markings were not a part of the plan, as of yet, Baack got frustrated and exclaimed to the ODOT representatives, "You guys need to get with it (in terms of pedestrian sensitivity)." This comment created a stalemate, and the committee decided to move on to the next project.

Bret Richards, an ODOT Project Leader, described ODOT's plans for the I-5 Iowa Viaduct. He began by telling the committee that the "bridge is ending its design life" and that the "best thing is to replace the whole structure." He claimed that there will still be three open lanes each way during reconstruction, and that the traffic will just be diverted to a detour structure.

According to Richards, the construction design should be finalized in 2009, with construction beginning in spring 2010. As construction will be conducted 24 hours a day, seven days a week, Richards stated that the project will take between two and three years to complete.

Similar to the first project, committee members had their own questions and concerns. One committee member asked if ODOT was going to conduct a traffic impact study. Richards said that there are no plans to conduct a study, as there will still be 3 highway lanes each way.

Another committee member noted

that Southwest Portland is prone to landslides, and she questioned how ODOT is going to handle this potential obstacle. Richards replied that "geotech people have been doing a lot of drilling in the area to see what type of material is out there."

Baack was particularly upset to hear that the project might close a trail that is situated underneath the viaduct. In an e-mail the following day, Mike Mason, ODOT's Community Affairs Coordinator, stated "We are very early in the design phase of this project. So it is unclear when and for how long the trail will need to be closed for safety reasons."

"It's possible it may have to be closed for the entire duration of the project, but we will look for ways to keep it open during periods of construction. However, safety is the primary concern and may impact how and when the trail is open."

Nevertheless, Baack stressed how ODOT will need to "accommodate a lot of pedestrians" and how ODOT needs to speak with the affected neighborhoods rather than [Portland Parks and Recreation].

The ODOT representatives at the meeting acknowledged the committee members' concerns and said that they would like to do the various projects that the members suggested, but they also said that they are restricted in terms of their funding. After that final statement, the ODOT team left the meeting.

The rest of the meeting predominantly focused on the Governor's proposed "Jobs and Transportation Act of 2009." According to the

Governor's website, "The Governor's comprehensive transportation plan will create thousands of jobs; establish sustainable long-term funding for Oregon's statewide transportation system and address greenhouse gas emissions in transportation construction and planning." SWNI wants part of the funding for Southwest Portland.

Marianne Fitzgerald, chair of the SWNI Transportation Committee, stated that the group has "to figure out a legislative strategy." She remarked that the group needs to develop a "lobbying packet" and needs to have "lobbying training." She stressed that the group has "to be ready to go at the drop of a hat."

The Committee's top priorities to address in legislation are the three Capitol Highway projects, Barbur Boulevard and the Red Electric Trail. Fitzgerald also hopes that a bike path project will be involved in the economic stimulus package, as there are "so many needs for bike paths in Southwest Portland."

To conclude the meeting, various committee members gave updates on their neighborhoods. Baack said that a troubling traffic signal in Hillsdale is now fixed; it is controlling five lanes instead of four.

Durtschi said that Multnomah is predominantly pushing for Capitol Highway projects. She also mentioned that her association spoke about the possibility of public transportation improvements on Barbur. Finally, Jim Gardner from South Portland spoke about a package of improvements that is going to council regarding the south waterfront.

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