

## Sellwood Bridge

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of 20 years, from a proposed new \$19 annual County surtax on motor vehicle registrations developed by Commissioner Deborah Kafoury. Last month the Multnomah County Commission approved the surtax by unanimous vote.

Commissioner Jeff Cogen said that enacting such a fee is "not easy at any time, but especially today. For many people, \$19 a year is a real burden." Despite this, he said, enacting the fee is "the right thing to do."

Cogen mentioned that several talk radio hosts had criticized the fee, but that despite this, "There is no one out there storming the gates. The feedback has been overwhelmingly positive." He added, "This is not the state bailing out Multnomah County, it is Multnomah County helping itself."

Only five people testified on the proposal, and only one spoke against it. Terry Parker, a Rose City Park resident who has consistently opposed mass transit projects, was incensed that the bridge as planned calls for expanded pedestrian paths, two bike lanes, and possibly future streetcar tracks.

In colorful language he called the project a product of the "Bernie Madoff school of financing," a "Ponzi scheme," and an "exercise in social engineering to determine how people move about." Bike and pedestrian facilities, if included, should be paid for by the "freeloading" advocates of such transportation or by the Sellwood community, he said.

Laura Jackson and Brian Wilson, both members of a citizen task force that studied the issue (and sometimes complained that County government didn't listen to them) both endorsed the fee. So did Eric Miller, who said he uses the bridge on an "almost daily basis."

Miller conceded that a bridge toll, once under consideration, "would have been more equitable, but was difficult. No one wants additional fees," but Kafoury's proposal would amount to a "modest increase," he said. Given the extent of Clackamas County residents' use, it would be "appropriate for them to share" in the funding, he said. "We're not done, but this is a huge step forward."

Heather Cook, a Sellwood resident, said the fee, and moving the project forward, was more than a local issue. Continuing to maintain the old bridge would waste "a lot of tax dollars." If it became necessary to close it, it would "cut off a significant chunk of the county and put pressure on the other bridges. I live one-third of a mile away, I seldom use it, but we all need it for safety and vitality."

Kafoury commented, "To be honest, I wasn't sure we'd ever be able to find the money. No one wanted to be the first one forward."

There was strong support for the bridge plans in general at a September 30 open house attended by 130 people. The most significant changes to previous plans were to the western end of the new bridge.

Westbound exit lanes have been reduced from three to two. In place of large circular ramps, the bicycle accesses are now a series of switchbacks. There were minor tweaks to improve access to destinations such as Willamette Bay Moorage and Riverview Cemetery.

Although Sellwood residents predominated, as they have throughout the process, there were more west side residents at this open house. They were divided between satisfied and concerns with the west side plans.

## Creating jobs in Oregon requires health care reform

### COMMENTARY

By Jeff Merkley

Over the summer, we heard about the tragic losses many American families have endured as a result of our broken health care system.

There are too many stories of folks who lost a loved one because their insurance didn't cover a life-saving treatment, or lost their homes because they were socked with huge medical bills.

Health care reform will help end these terrible losses, but it also provides us with something to gain. By lowering costs and increasing choice, we'll stimulate job growth, restore our economy, and keep wages with working families instead of handing them over to insurance companies.

Just last month, I spoke with a small business owner in Medford who told me that rising health care costs were forcing his company to choose between providing health coverage or laying off

employees.

Businesses around the country are experiencing the same squeeze, and it means fewer jobs and lower wages for working Americans.

In the last decade, health care premiums for the average Oregon family rose by 101 percent, while median earnings rose by only 23.8 percent.

It's no coincidence: employers are spending more and more on compensation for their employees; it's just going towards higher insurance premiums instead of higher wages.

Health costs are not only siphoning away money that could go towards higher wages or new hires, they're also making our companies less competitive globally.

If you build a car in America, you spend \$1,500 on health care benefits. If you build it across the border in Canada, the cost is zero. Indeed, GM spent more on health care last year than it did on steel. That's bad for American business and bad for American jobs.

Working families in Oregon can't

afford to sacrifice their jobs and their incomes to the health insurance beast anymore. It's time we get our priorities back in place.

By improving care, increasing choices, and lowering health costs, we can put our businesses and families in the position to thrive.

There's still more work to do as health care reform winds its way through the legislative process, but each step that moves a bill closer to President Obama's desk is a step towards a brighter economic future for Oregon families.

*U.S. Senator Jeff Merkley, a Democrat, is the junior senator from Oregon.*

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