

Bridging the Future

I-5 bridge projects will have parkland impact.

If interest in a new I-5 Willamette River bridge increases as fast as its cost estimates, the massive project won't suffer from a lack of citizen involvement. An opportunity for public testimony will come during a joint hearing of the Eugene, Springfield and Lane County planning commissions at 5:30 pm June 3 in the Springfield council chambers. Councils from both cities will take up the issue later in June.

During a mid-March presentation by Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) Manager Dean Fuller, the pricetag on a temporary bridge with a 10-year lifespan was \$12 million. The new permanent bridge, to be built in the existing I-5 corridor, was going to cost \$58 million. But by the time Fuller spoke to the full Citizen Planning Committee for the Whilamut Natural Area (WNA) of Alton Baker Park on April 16, the price of the temporary bridge was up to \$30 million, and the permanent structure had risen to \$70 million.

Springfield's Willamalane Park and Recreation district and the city of Eugene's Parks and Open Space division will be compensated by ODOT for use of their parkland, although the true cost to the WNA of the bridge and its northern extension may be impossible to set in dollar figures.

Alton Baker is the Central Park of the Eugene-Springfield metro region, and the

park's WNA is its most unique feature: Very few urban areas anywhere in the world offer centrally located parkland managed for natural values. The WNA's 237 acres link two cities, are dedicated to passive recreation, and recognize the Kalapuya people, first human residents of the Willamette Valley.

ODOT is poised to bid a contract for the temporary bridge, and hopes to have the com-

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pleted structure carrying traffic by September 2004. They've been granted the \$30 million by the Oregon Transportation Commission. If they can convince Springfield and Eugene officials in June to allow Willamette Greenway exceptions, the plan is to wedge the temporary span into a narrow space just east of the existing corridor. A new quarter-mile loaf of fill will carry bridge traffic north of the river. Everything in its path — cedars, cottonwoods, maples, larkspur and bleeding-heart — will be cut, buried or moved. Herons in a nearby rookery are sure to be disturbed by the noise of piles being driven, fill being dumped and lighting for night work.

ODOT's plans specify that when the permanent bridge is completed, which might not be until 2011 or later, the temporary span and fill will be removed, and Willamalane's park-

land will be restored. "It's not the old ODOT that used to crunch through houses and stuff like that. We don't expect to use something and tear it apart and not make it better," Fuller, the ODOT project manager, said in April.

But this is what park users can expect for at least the next year while the temporary bridge goes up:

- Periodic closures to one of the most heavily used bicycle-pedestrian corridors in the region, as it passes beneath I-5 along the north bank of the Willamette River. (The

route under the freeway through the canoe canal slot will also be affected, because that bridge is scheduled for a similar two-phase rebuild.)

- Establishment of an extensive heavy equipment staging area north of the Knickerbocker bridge and west of the existing I-5 causeway. Runners using the WNA's Prefontaine trail could be forced to abandon the 1.5 mile prairie loop, or wait for flaggers to usher them through a moving field of tractors and cranes.

- Resiting of one of the Whilamut's Talking Stones — the Li-Yuu ("Prairie") stone — formerly located on the edge of the proposed staging area. (The 11 Talking Stones will be dedicated on May 31 in the park.)

- Further deterioration of the undulating

road across the prairie due to heavy equipment being hauled to the worksite from an entrance off Leo Harris parkway near Autzen Stadium.

After completion of the temporary bridge, which ODOT is fast-tracking to end detouring heavy trucks all the way to central Oregon, the park could experience as many as five years of relative calm while the permanent bridge is debated, designed and built. A more thorough round of public hearings and environmental assessments are legally mandated for this process.

So let's say the permanent bridge is built on schedule, and everything is done eight years from now. The temporary span and fill are gone. We can finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Except that 50 years later it's scheduled to happen again. The new permanent bridge, like its decayed predecessor, is designed to fail sometime after mid-century. Assuming our government is still fueled by oil and the politics of internal combustion, can we, or our descendants, look forward to a third "permanent" bridge?

Fuller isn't so sure. "I'm an optimist," he said recently. "I think maybe by then we'll all be flying around in vehicles above the ground, like the Jetsons."

But isn't that what pundits in 1950 told us would be happening now? **EW**

David Sonnichsen is chair of the Citizen Planning Committee for the Whilamut Natural Area of Alton Baker Park. The bi-city committee's five Springfield members are appointed by the Willamalane board, and its 10 Eugene members are appointed by the mayor and confirmed by the City Council.

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