

THE MONEY IS NOT THERE

State asks city taxpayers to take responsibility for parkway.

By Alan Pittman

When developers and their friends were pushing to pass the West Eugene Parkway (WEP) back in 2001, they repeatedly promised the project would not involve city taxpayer money.

"The state will build and maintain it," one ad in *The Register-Guard* claimed as fact. "It is not the responsibility of the city of Eugene." The ad listed the names of 13 conservative local elected officials backing its statements, including Eugene Mayor Jim Torrey.

Another ad proclaimed "THE MONEY IS THERE" and featured Torrey's photo with the quotation, "The state has the money to fund the West Eugene Parkway and is committed to pay for it — all of it."

But now those campaign claims are in doubt. The Oregon Department of Transportation has asked the city of Eugene and Lane County to agree to accept that ODOT will "jurisdictionally transfer" the eastern half of the WEP to the city and county. ODOT wants the transfer to circumvent state and federal requirements that new highways they fund not be quickly clogged with traffic as ODOT now projects the eastern WEP will be.

Such a transfer of jurisdiction raises questions about who will pay to build and maintain the transferred highway. "Who pays for the costs?" Lane County staff asked in a memo to commissioners. The state's proposed memorandum of understanding (MOU) agreement does not commit the state to cover all construction overruns or maintenance costs. Normally, the city and county pay for the construction and maintenance of streets that they jurisdictionally control.

Rob Zako of 1000 Friends of Oregon says ODOT's proposed jurisdictional transfer is a "direct contradiction" of the proponents' campaign claims about the WEP. "The voters were told one thing and now we're being offered something else," Zako says. "The state may build it, but they're only going to maintain half of it."

Eugene officials have complained for years that with a \$90 million maintenance backlog, the city doesn't have enough money to maintain the streets it has now.

The Eugene City Council will take up the issue of the parkway MOU next Wednesday, Sept. 22 at noon.

The question of whether city taxpayers would be stuck paying for the WEP was a hot issue during the campaign three years ago. Opponents questioned where the money would come from and whether city taxpayers would be hit with the bill. A \$120,000 ad campaign by development interests pushed the WEP advisory vote to a narrow victory.

In 2001, the state estimated the WEP would cost \$88 million in 1997 dollars. Now that estimate has reached \$111 million in 1997 dollars. Adjusting for inflation, that figure translates to at least \$131 million in current money. So far, the state has committed only \$17 million for the project.

With WEP costs continuing to spiral, Zako says the city should get clear information from ODOT on who will pay for building and maintaining the freeway before signing any MOU. ODOT is asking the city to "say yes now and we'll figure out later what you said yes to," he says.

Besides who will pay, the jurisdiction transfer also raises a host of other unanswered questions about a freeway that's been mired in decades of controversy over urban sprawl, fiscal waste and destroying wetlands.

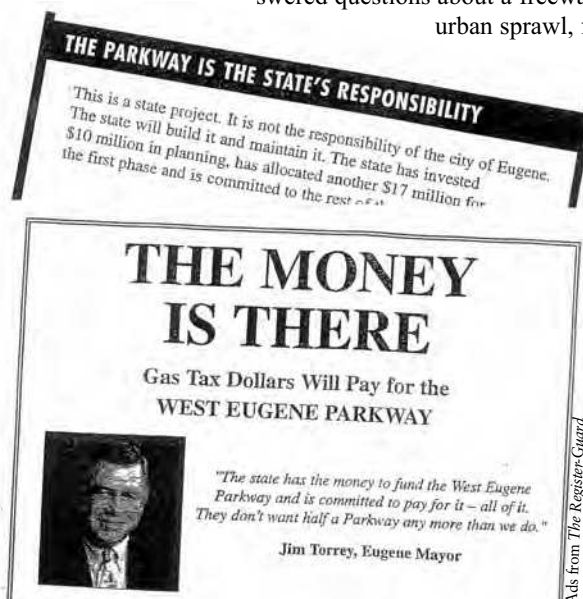
- The new council and mayor coming in January appear to have a majority opposed to the project and may repeal any agreements to build the freeway that lame duck conservatives make.

- City jurisdiction could allow multiple driveways and businesses on the freeway making it as clogged as West 11th.

- ODOT earlier rejected proposals to build streets under city jurisdiction instead of the WEP because it said the project required a state highway.

- Can ODOT legally build a freeway through a rare wetlands park?

- When, if ever, will the rest of the money for the project come? Does it make sense to spend millions on a section of a road to nowhere?





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