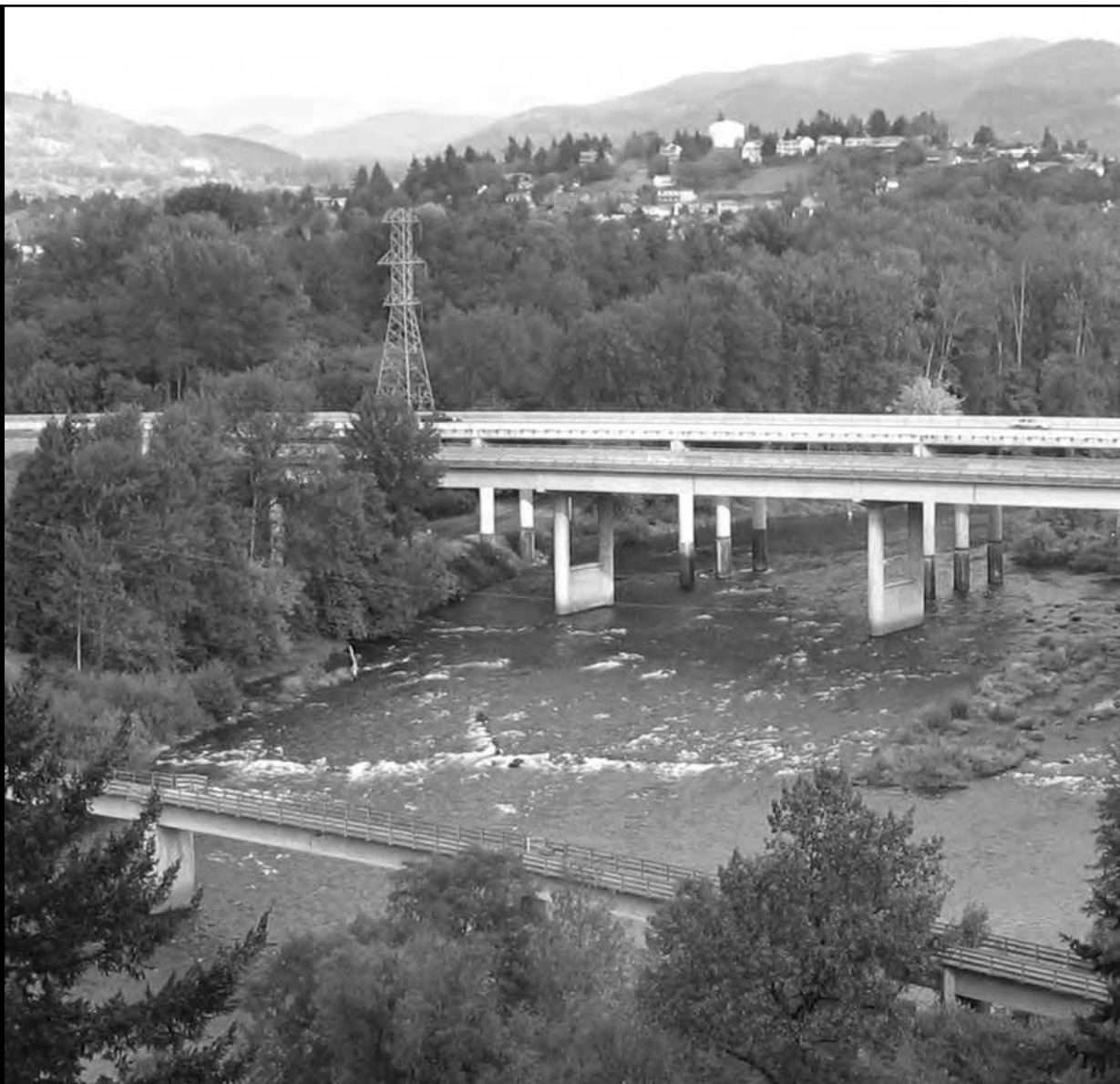


Ramped Up

Proposed I-5 Franklin interchange could have big impact. BY ALAN PITTMAN

A proposed full freeway interchange at I-5 and Franklin Boulevard could cost \$120 million and have a big impact on surrounding neighborhoods and natural areas as well as downtown redevelopment.



The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) plans to bring concept sketches of connecting I-5 and Franklin to county and city governments this month to get input on whether and how to move the project forward.

Right now Franklin connects to I-5 from and to the south but not north.

In this tentative, scoping phase “what ODOT is going to be looking for is a thumbs up or thumbs down,” said Lisa Gardner, a senior transportation planner with the city of Eugene.

Neighborhoods surrounding the proposed interchange are concerned about traffic and noise impacts, and the project

But Chris Stevens, who lives in a house adjacent to a possible proposed ramp, said he’d be willing to sell his house to ODOT. The neighborhood already has problems with speeding traffic and odors from the county’s garbage transfer station across the freeway in Glenwood. “You already get the lovely smell of the dump six to eight times a year.”

Jan Wostmann, co-chair of the Laurel Hill Neighborhood Association, said the valley southeast of I-5 currently has a lot of trouble with freeway noise, and the elevated ramps would only make the problem a lot worse. He said cutting off the Franklin access “would have a lot of opposition” from the neighborhood.

“I hope they will keep the neighborhood involved,”

calming to reduce the impact on the neighborhood from plans for more dense, nodal redevelopment along Franklin. The node concept was for a more pedestrian-friendly area. But it’s already hard to cross Franklin, and with all the traffic from a new interchange, “it certainly makes it harder.”

The project would also have an environmental impact on the Willamette River and parkland. Several possible design concepts include on and off ramps that would stretch across the Willamette as separate bridges. One would cut just a few feet away from a bike bridge leading to Alton Baker Park. On the south side, the ramps would cut through trees and riparian vegetation and on the north land in a heavily forested, natural area of the park.

“What ODOT is going to be looking for is a thumbs up or thumbs down.”

— *Lisa Gardner, Eugene transportation planner*

could damage the Willamette River and parkland. But supporters say if done right, the full new interchange could relieve pressure for other, more damaging river crossings, while helping to fight urban sprawl by spurring redevelopment of downtown Eugene and Springfield and Glenwood.

The Laurel Hill Valley neighborhood of east Eugene could have the greatest direct impact. Some of ODOT’s initial concept sketches for the interchange show an on-ramp adjacent to or through existing houses and severing the neighborhood’s connection to Franklin Boulevard. Such a configuration could increase noise, light and exhaust pollution in the neighborhood, increase neighborhood traffic and force long drives over Hendrick’s Hill or through Glenwood to reach the rest of Eugene.

“Having an on-ramp in your front yard doesn’t sound like a great fun thing,” says Daniel Spitzer, 29, who rents a house near the freeway. Spitzer usually bikes and opposes the interchange idea.

Evan Hughes lives on Riverview Street and said he’d also oppose the project for its noise, light and traffic impact.

Wostmann said. “I’d like to see them come talk to us.”

On the other side of the hill, the Fairmont neighborhood also could have a lot at stake in the proposed interchange.

Fairmont neighbors have already organized to complain of severe traffic problems in their neighborhood with cars speeding through residential areas to get to Franklin.

The interchange “is likely to push a huge volume of traffic onto Franklin” which might increase people taking shortcuts through the neighborhood, said Allen Lowe, a city transportation planner.

In past years, city staff said that computer modeling of a new interchange showed increased neighborhood traffic from shortcutting. But more recent modeling of the impact hasn’t yet been done, ODOT planner Tom Boyatt said. “I just don’t know.”

Given the already existing traffic problems, the interchange “is ill considered,” said David Sonnichsen, who’s heading a Fairmont neighborhood association subcommittee focused on the interchange’s traffic impact.

Lowe said the city is already examining ways to use traffic

“I just don’t think that three bridges with all the pilings to support that would be a very attractive prospect,” said Sonnichsen, who has also served on the East Alton Baker Park Planning Committee. All the pilings could affect fish in the river and boating, he said.

“My main concern is what it might do to the river and the parkland too,” said City Councilor Betty Taylor.

Boyatt said ODOT could take care to protect the river during construction and mitigate the visual impact with a better design. Some of ODOT’s initial sketches of options keep the ramps adjacent to the planned new permanent I-5 bridge.

Downtown Boost

But despite the neighborhood and environmental concerns, supporters of the idea say it could be a boost for Eugene and Springfield downtowns, if done right.

The idea originally gained currency a decade ago as an alternative to a wide freeway-like Ferry Street Bridge and as a central city alternative to the sprawl-inducing I-5 interchange