

INTERSTATE 5 BRIDGE

Kotek, Drazan, Johnson have competing visions

By SAM STITES
Oregon Public Broadcasting

As candidates turn from their May primary races to the November general election, there is no shortage of massive issues facing the state for them to focus upon. But few issues are as physically imposing as the Interstate 5 bridge across the Columbia River.

And one of the three candidates vying to be Oregon's next chief executive is likely to shape key aspects of the bridge's replacement.

Democrat Tina Kotek, Republican Christine Drazan and nonaffiliated candidate Betsy Johnson offer differing views on what the project should prioritize, as advocates seek priorities for equity, climate and vehicle capacity over a bridge that's been decades in the works.

The one thing they all agree on is this: Oregon and Washington state cannot afford to kick the can down the road any longer.

The previous iteration of the project — the failed Columbia River Crossing — spent more than \$150 million in taxpayer money from 2005 to 2013 with little to show for it besides studies and design concepts.

In 2019, Oregon Gov. Kate Brown and Washington Gov. Jay Inslee announced they were reviving the project to replace the twin-truss bridges built in 1917 and 1958. And the total price tag has grown from around \$3 billion to nearly \$5 billion.

Competing visions

With an influx of federal cash and Oregon's favorable economic forecast, all three of the women seeking to be the next governor see a window of opportunity to finally build the bridge.

"As governor, I'll get that bridge built," said Johnson, who recently stepped down after two decades in the Oregon Legislature to run for governor. "I think that is a key responsibility of the governor to take a lead role, not outsource this conversation to third parties like Metro, or the city of Vancouver."

Drazan, a former state representative from Canby and leader of the House Republican caucus, said she's also an advocate for building the bridge, and that she would take an active role to balance the many competing interests.

"It's really important that these conversations stay focused on this transportation question," Drazan said. "There has to be additional weight and priority given to the transportation needs in the region for the



Bradley W. Parks/Oregon Public Broadcasting

The Interstate 5 bridge connecting Washington state and Oregon across the Columbia River as seen from Vancouver, Washington.

next 50 or 100 years."

Kotek, who declined an interview for this story but offered a statement, said she'll also prioritize getting the bridge replaced, but placed emphasis on how Oregon could boost public transport rather than more car travel.

"We need a safe bridge that will serve future generations, provide transportation choices like high-capacity transit, and be a better solution to helping solve our climate crisis," she said in an email.

As the Democratic candidate, Kotek's promise comes with some complexities. Her campaign is heavily funded by some of the state's largest labor interests. That includes unions representing carpenters, iron workers and electricians, all of who stand to gain contracts from a megaproject like the Interstate 5 bridge replacement.

The former House speaker is also viewed as the candidate who will stand up for environmental interests. While there's no substantive conflict between labor and environment, unions representing working families fundamentally want to see projects that provide many good-paying jobs.

Union representatives told Oregon Public Broadcasting they think Kotek would support apprenticeships around big projects like the bridge replacement, a move unions want to help train the next generation in tradecrafts.

Northwest Carpenters Union political director Matt Swanson said the state's construction workforce needs a leader who will champion policies that support new workers — particularly women and people of color — gaining valuable experience.

"Any investment in infrastructure is going to put carpenters to work," he said. "We want to make sure that any elected official that gets our endorsement is going to lead on those issues in a way that really

looks at the communities that we need to create jobs in and the needs of those communities. Tina Kotek is someone that's always been accountable to working people."

Swanson said projects of this magnitude require a complicated balance between creating jobs and keeping the state focused on aggressive climate goals. That's why the union is backing Kotek, who Swanson believes has credibility across all fronts.

Climate activists, however, are putting pressure on state lawmakers and other key decision-makers to scale back the project to reduce vehicle emissions while encouraging bike and pedestrian crossings, as well as public transit.

Earlier this month, hundreds of teenagers from across Portland gathered for a climate strike in front of City Hall. The event was the latest in a series of ongoing protests put on by the Sunrise Movement, a youth-based activist group calling on the Oregon Department of Transportation to center climate justice in its projects, such as the bridge and I-5 Rose Quarter expansion.

"Right now, our leaders have a choice to make," said Adah Crandall, a student at Grant High School, and one of the Sunrise Movement's leaders. "They can either continue to side with the climate villains that are destroying our planet, or they can side with the young people who are gathered here today, fighting for our future."

Wider lanes, more cars

One of the most significant decisions in the bridge's future, and an area where the next governor of Oregon could have influence, is how many lanes of traffic and how much public transport will happen on the next I-5 bridge. That's where Kotek, Johnson and Drazan start to diverge.

Proponents of a bridge wider than the current bridge's three-lane configuration, such as Drazan, say the region needs to think about future demand — whether that's gas or electric vehicles — and moving freight more efficiently through a corridor with international significance.

Project managers recently announced their preferred bridge scenario, which includes just four lanes in each direction. That's down from 12 and 10 lane configurations analyzed in the Columbia River Crossing. They also want to pursue light rail instead of express buses. None of these recommendations are final and will require input from several committees.

Oregon and Washington state lawmakers say they're concerned the project managers are coming in with too narrow of a vision for what a new bridge might look like, and that not adding traffic lanes will only further exacerbate the chokepoint that exists for passenger vehicles and freight.

Drazan criticized the way some transportation projects in Oregon have been slow to emerge, even as the state allocates billions of dollars toward them. She said the state Department of Transportation is mired in the complicated politics of planning while the trucking industry suffers.

Jana Jarvis, the president of the Oregon Trucking Association and a member of the bridge project's community advisory group, said she worries the needs of regional freight businesses aren't being fully heard, especially if the I-5 bridge will not grow notably wider.

"I have repeatedly requested that this proposal move forward with more capacity than one auxiliary (lane)," Jarvis said. "We're going to continue the drumbeat on adding capacity to the bridge. It's inconceivable to me that we're going to put \$5-plus billion into a new structure, with only marginal capacity improvements."

Johnson said Oregon's primary need is a "safer, bigger" bridge.

"And by bigger, I mean more capacity to serve more cars and more freight," Johnson said. "That's the purpose of this bridge."

Johnson voted in favor of the 2013 package Oregon funded, which included light rail as a part of that effort to replace the bridge. Now, she said, she will push to get the bridge replaced with or without the inclusion of public transit options or bike and pedestrian paths.

"It is time to have a sense of urgency. I will not let the demands of light rail or bike lanes hold the bridge hostage," Johnson said.

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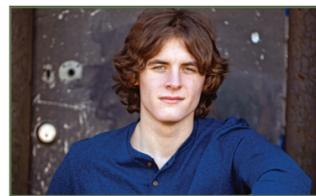
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