

“Just the Basics”–

The Columbia River Crossing Project

August 4, 2004

What is happening with the Columbia River Crossing Project? How does it relate to the earlier I-5 Transportation and Trade Partnership? As ODOT and WSDOT management meet on August 4 to define a partnership for implementing the project, several topics are pertinent. See information inside on:

- Carrying forward I-5 Partnership recommendations on freeway, transit, finance, and environmental justice – pre-EIS technical analyses to answer outstanding questions
- Current understanding of geographic scope of project
- Joint WSDOT/ODOT project team structure
- Communications and public outreach approach
- Near-term guidance and decisions needed from DOT management

CARRYING FORWARD I-5 PARTNERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS

Where Did These Ideas Emerge?

The I-5 Transportation and Trade Partnership involved regional leadership in Washington and Oregon between 2001 and 2002 in examining the I-5 corridor and related freight facilities. A diverse group of people – citizens, business and freight interests, neighborhood organizations, and local, regional, and state governments – participated actively in the I-5 Partnership Task Force. A wide range of corridor-wide improvements and traffic management solutions were recommended in the resulting *I-5 Transportation and Trade Partnership Strategic Plan*. Two specific recommendations, the subject of the Columbia River Crossing Project, were:

- to add capacity in the I-5 corridor across the Columbia River.
- to consider high-capacity transit improvements in the area of the I-5 Columbia River Bridge.

Recommendations that also are being addressed in this project include study of financing options, and consideration of low-income and minority populations within the corridor in relation to those specific recommendations. Additional technical analysis is under way to answer questions and prepare to facilitate a smooth transition between the Strategic Plan and the beginning of the environmental review process (a draft environmental impact statement or DEIS).

The region remains very interested in taking the next steps – converting its recommendations into action and regional improvements. Business, government, and neighborhood interests continue to demonstrate commitment to solving regional economy, safety, congestion, and quality of life issues playing out in the Columbia River crossing area. They have questions about what will happen and when; the project team is preparing to answer those questions.

Why Do Technical Analyses Now?

The Strategic Plan recommendations were just that, conceptual recommendations. The technical work in this phase will further define and refine these conceptual recommendations, and some concepts that were not part of the original study will be analyzed. The current work focuses on those elements that must be completed in order to advance a project as quickly as possible through the NEPA process. It should be substantially faster and less expensive to develop the structure for the EIS now, before starting the DEIS, by:

- Adequately preparing for scoping, when public and decision makers will provide input on a manageable number of promising options that appropriately represent the range of benefits and impacts that address the project's purpose and need.
- Modeling and evaluating project funding assumptions.

- Working with FHWA and FTA to define the project process.
- Resolving organizational and procedural issues as a foundation for starting the DEIS.
- Developing a bi-state agreement to manage the project.

What Do the Technical Analyses Include?

Between now and mid-2005, the project is answering critical questions and preparing technical analyses, building a sound foundation for project scoping and environmental review. The technical analyses include conceptual engineering and environmental analysis, finance and tolling, traffic and transit, and regulatory analysis. The figure on the following page illustrates the flow of recommended concepts from the I-5 Partnership, and key work to be done before scoping begins. Some of the questions that will be answered through the current technical work are:

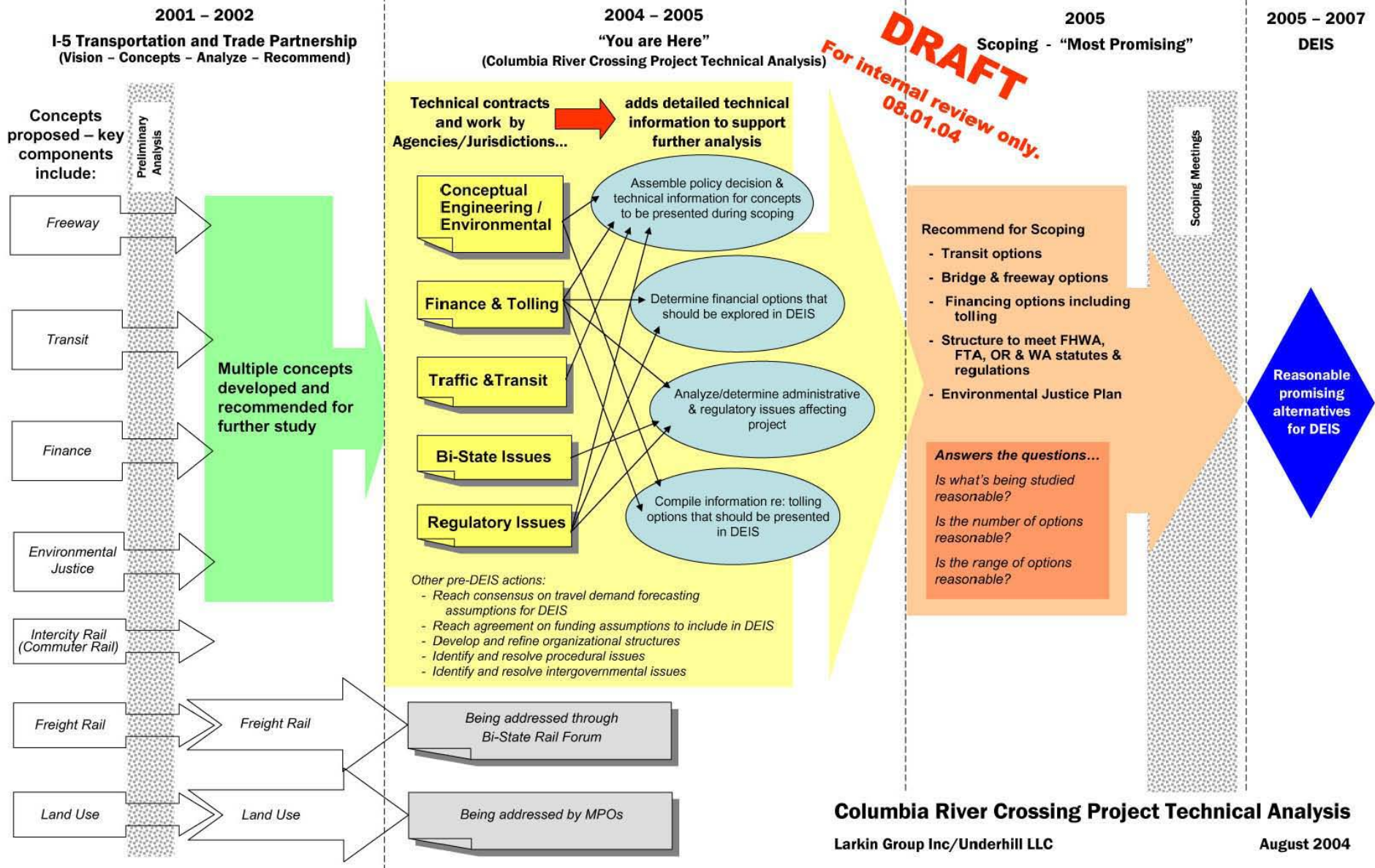
- What is the current traffic and travel demand situation on the corridor, and what travel demand forecasting assumptions will be used in the DEIS?
- What are the most important engineering and environmental issues that will help shape the project options? What other project options should be studied?
- What financing options should be explored in the DEIS, and what are the possibilities for tolling a new facility(ies)?
- What are Oregon’s and Washington’s administrative and regulatory environments for a potential project, and are any changes to administrative or regulatory frameworks needed?
- How should the project be organized, and what are the bi-state intergovernmental and decision-making structures?
- What are the right strategies to achieve context-sensitive and sustainable solutions in the corridor?
- What low-income and minority populations live and work in the study area, and what outreach will help bring them into project activities?

With this information compiled and analyzed, both DOTs, in consultation with a broad range of regional interests, will define a reasonable and promising set of alternatives to take into scoping and the DEIS process.

WHAT IS THE COLUMBIA RIVER CROSSING PROJECT’S GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE?

The I-5 corridor between Clark County and Portland faces increasing pressures of congestion, safety, and delays in freight and commuter movement. The Interstate Bridge across the Columbia River, actually two side-by-side bridges built in 1917 and 1958, is a critical connection.

- Continue collaboration with local electeds, jurisdictions, businesses and other community leaders
- Begin conversations with the general public, neighborhoods, interest groups, etc.
- Implement media strategy
- Publicize and conduct NEPA scoping
- Analyze scoping input
- Prepare EIS-phase outreach plan



However, effects of growth are felt not only in the area of the bridge itself. The Columbia River Crossing Project, will focus on the area of “bridge influence” – from SR 500 in Vancouver to Columbia Blvd. in Portland, reaching further to the west and encompassing the railroad bridge, and east as far as the I-205 corridor and that river crossing.

HOW WILL JOINT ODOT/WSDOT PROJECT TEAM BE STRUCTURED?

Chartered as a bi-state project team, and to be operated under a memorandum of understanding between the two agencies which is under development, the Columbia River Crossing team members are working together to frame the project, conduct the analyses described above, and lay the groundwork for broad participation by all interests.

(To be developed further following 8/4 session)

HOW WILL THE PROJECT DEFINE A STATE AND REGIONAL DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURE?

During this phase of the project (through mid-2005), the emphasis is on gathering and analyzing the adequacy of existing information, filling information and data gaps, and identifying characteristics of conceptual options that may make them promising for further evaluation. This phase of the project sets the stage for longer-term decisions, and does include some points at which project directions will need to be determined – traffic and design assumptions, possibilities for tolling and other financing mechanisms, etc., all to be carried forward into scoping and the DEIS for full evaluation.

(To be further developed following the 8/4 session)

HOW WILL THE PROJECT ACHIEVE COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC OUTREACH?

A detailed project communications and public outreach plan is under development. The primary focus during the remainder of 2004 is on community leadership --- business, neighborhood, and special interest groups --- and a move to add to that and communicate more broadly with the general public starting early in 2005. The objective will be to ensure clear understanding of the scope and limitations of this pre-EIS work, to prepare people to participate effectively in the scoping and environmental review processes, and to elicit and prepare to resolve issues from the broad range of potentially affected public groups. All work will be done in accordance with the principles of context sensitive and sustainable design, and needed research will be completed to ensure that project outreach to low-income and minority communities is in full compliance with environmental justice requirements and guidelines.

The communications and outreach team will support development of project technical work products by consulting on format and style, developing and implementing product summaries, release strategies, and supporting information materials. Project scoping in

late winter/spring of 2005 will be the launch of aggressive public communication and outreach, with the goal of defining the most promising and reasonable alternatives for DEIS analysis.

Near-Term Questions for DOT Management

The project team continues to make progress in work on the Columbia River Crossing Project. All contractor support for this phase has now been scoped and contracted, and the joint ODOT/WSDOT team is working in coordination to compile, analyze, and prepare to communicate project information. Guidance from DOT management that is needed to confirm project understandings and allow the work to move forward includes:

- Developing MOA to govern two-DOT management and decision-making, and reflecting that agreement in team structure and procedures
- Confirming geographic scope of project
- Deciding on project advisory structure
- Deciding on project decision-making structure, including Commissions' Subcommittee, DOT headquarters management, DOT regional management, FHWA and FTA, with input from Bi-State Coordinating Committee, potential advisory body, and other regional leadership, as well as general public
- Analyzing adequacy of project funding as it relates to project schedule, contractor scopes, etc.