



Washington transportation chief: Bridge funding options are scarce

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Washington's top transportation official says the state will rely heavily on tolling to replace the Interstate 5 Bridge and might court private partners to provide an infusion of early cash.

In a bleak assessment of the project's funding options, Paula Hammond, Washington transportation secretary, also told The Columbia's editorial board Wednesday not to expect a huge commitment of federal highway dollars for the Columbia River Crossing project.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash, chairwoman of the Senate Transportation Appropriations subcommittee, might be able to shake loose \$125 million, Hammond said. That's less than a third of the federal contribution bridge planners listed in a draft study.

"We just can't rely on a federal program that is drying up," she said.

The state of Washington has provided \$50 million in state gas tax revenue so far toward bridge design and environmental studies. But that source, too, is shriveling, Hammond said.

Vehicle miles traveled dropped by 2 percent statewide between April 2007 and April 2008. The state expects to come up \$60 million short in gas tax revenue for the current biennium and up to \$100 million short in the 2009-11 budget cycle.

And with gas at more than \$4 per gallon, "We can't increase the gas tax," Hammond said. "We have no idea today where the state contribution would come from."

For construction to begin in late 2011, "a miracle would have to happen in Olympia," or else a private investor would have to emerge, she said.

Project sponsors repeatedly have said tolls on the new bridge will be necessary. But as for "pre-tolling" — collecting tolls on the existing spans — "that's a hard sell," she said. "The trick here is we need early money."

Private investors could provide that money to keep the project going through preliminary engineering and design, an alternative to pre-tolling, Hammond said. Toll proceeds then would be used to pay off the investors.

Tolling also would pay off some construction debt, Hammond said. In fact, she added, the federal government is pushing the region to take that step.

"Rather than sending us buckets of money, they are encouraging us to help ourselves through tolling," she said.

Hammond's comments Wednesday raise questions about the region's ability to afford a \$3.43 billion to \$3.61 billion project, an estimate that presumes a light-rail line ending at Clark College.

The project's draft environmental statement released in early May offers rough financial scenarios for how the project would be paid for:

- \$654 million to \$689 million from the Federal Transit Administration for light-rail construction.
- \$400 million to \$600 million in federal highway dollars.
- \$401.5 million to \$715 million in state dollars from Washington, plus a similar contribution

from Oregon.

- \$1.07 billion to \$1.35 billion from bonds, with bridge tolls used to gradually pay off that debt.

Tolls on a new bridge could cost as much as \$2.50 each way, depending on the time of day, and increase regularly to keep up with inflation. Commuters could end up paying \$1,250 annually to cross the bridge twice a day, five days a week.

Hammond said Seattle commuters could pay far more in tolls, perhaps as much as \$9 or \$10 each way, to use the new bridge that will replace the Highway 520 floating bridge. Pre-tolling also is on the table with that project.

"All of this is being tested in the Puget Sound area this fall," she said.

Hammond did not sound nearly as optimistic about putting together a funding package as Gov. Chris Gregoire did when she met with Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski at the north end of the I-5 Bridge last January.

"This is a task that's extremely important to our economic future, for the region," Gregoire said then. "We know there's a big job ahead. But today is the day we can say we're partners, and we're determined to make it happen."

But Hammond contacted The Columbian later Wednesday to reiterate her support for the project — and her belief that the state will provide its share.

"Over a number of years, I think \$400 million is reasonable," she said.

"I'm an optimist," she said. "It isn't going to be easy, that's for sure. But without the commitment on both sides of the river, we aren't going to succeed. The governor is there. I'm there."

Pearse Edwards, Gregoire's spokesman, echoed that sentiment.

"She's committed to this project," he said. "As with any project, you have to look at the funding. We need to go to the Legislature and talk to them about the various funding packages. ... Let's put our best foot forward and look for a way to fund this project from multiple streams."

Edwards said the governor, if she wins re-election this fall, plans to present a funding plan to the 2010 Legislature. That's the deadline for getting funding for the project included in the federal government's next multiyear transportation appropriation bill, although project sponsors want to start working on that process later this year.

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