



## The Oregonian

### Interstate 205 bridge over the Columbia River may get tolls

If funding for the \$4.2 billion I-5 span proposal falls short, another source of revenue would be needed

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**The Oregonian Staff**

Local officials may need to consider tolls on the Interstate 205 bridge if federal and state money falls short of paying for a new Interstate 5 toll bridge, Metro Councilor Rex Burkholder said Friday.

The issue came up during a City Club of Portland debate about a proposed \$4.2 billion replacement for the Interstate 5 bridge over the Columbia River. Burkholder, who favors a new toll bridge with a light-rail span, faced off against Portland economist Joe Cortright, a critic of the plan.

Raising money for construction through tolls would be highly effective and would provide a way for the bridge to help pay for itself and not take money from other transportation projects, Burkholder said in reply to a question from the audience.

"We have a captive audience; people have to get across the river," he said. "To be honest, we'll probably talk about tolling the 205 bridge as well, to be able to make this thing possible."

Columbia River Crossing project planners assumed that a new bridge would have tolls of \$2.56 during rush hours and \$1.28 at off-peak times -- in 2017 dollars. Those rates would be enough that only a small amount of traffic would use the I-205 bridge instead, Burkholder said after the forum.

If less state and federal money is available than expected, the project might need higher toll rates, he said. That would require local political leaders to consider tolling I-205, he said.

Bridge planners and elected officials have made it clear that the I-5 project won't get built without tolls, for two reasons: Federal money for highway projects is rapidly dwindling, and Oregon and Washington transportation officials want to experiment with tolls to reduce congestion.

Most of the City Club forum focused on Burkholder and Cortright's arguments for and against the bridge project, which would include a light-rail extension to Vancouver, the rebuilding of six highway interchanges, and improved bicycle and pedestrian paths.

Cortright compared the bridge proposal to the Washington Public Power Supply System debacle of the 1980s -- which became known as "Whoops". That nuclear power project fell victim to huge cost overruns and led to a \$2.25 billion municipal bond default.

The bridge project's 5,000-plus page environmental study compares with the work of French writer Marcel Proust, Cortright said. "It's interminably long, written in a foreign language, obsessed with a bygone time and largely a work of fiction. . . . All of its assumptions are based on a world of \$1 to \$1.25 gas."

The bridge project could reduce the money the region has for other priorities and promote sprawl in Clark County, Cortright said. Citing an article in The Oregonian, he said the project's forecasts assumed that a new bridge would have no impact on Clark County land-use patterns.

Burkholder said he had come to the project as a skeptic but has been convinced by three years of study as part of an I-5 task force that the bridge congestion bottleneck needs to be fixed. "I-5 is stop-and-go at 11 in the morning. Our rush hours are expanding and will continue to expand if we do nothing."

The oldest of the I-5's twin spans is nearly 100 years old, secured by Douglas fir logs "stuck in the mud" of the river, he said.

A new bridge could relieve congestion that hampers the region's economy and improve safety, Burkholder said. "It's the right thing to do at the right time. It's been studied well."

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