



## The Oregonian

### **Columbia River bridge plans ignore effects of growth, Designers decide not to factor in the extra sprawl, leading to traffic and pollution, that a bigger I-5 span might bring**

Sunday, June 22, 2008

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#### **FACTBOX**

- Bridge vote

In planning a new, higher-capacity I-5 bridge over the Columbia River, the Oregon and Washington transportation departments ignored the potential for growth in North Portland and southwest Washington that could bring about yet more traffic and pollution.

The Columbia River Crossing, as the bridge project is known, is designed to relieve congestion on the six-lane bridge that now frustrates Oregonians, commuters from Vancouver, and round-the-clock truckers struggling to keep their schedules.

But a paradox lies ahead: If a bigger bridge with more lanes is built, will it create demand for housing and jobs, and yet more congestion? And will the boosted congestion spew more greenhouse gas?

Transportation authorities say it could.

The Oregonian has learned that traffic forecasters involved in planning a new bridge, projected to cost \$4.2 billion, were told to assume a new 12-lane bridge would not trigger any more growth than if the current bridge were simply left in place. Yet a 12-lane bridge would handle 40 percent more cars during afternoon rush hour, according to the forecasters' calculations.

Ignored is a finding by regional planners, in 2001, that eliminating the bridge's bottleneck threatened to push job and housing growth away from other parts of the metropolitan area and concentrate them in North Portland and across the river, in a rapidly expanding Clark County.

That might or might not be a good thing. But it is absent from decision-making on a project that could, according to several planning experts, influence growth and quality of life in a region that prides itself on avoiding sprawl.

The bridge plan isn't decided yet. A vote Tuesday by a 39-member bistate panel will establish the preferred bridge solution from among five alternatives. In coming weeks, the Portland and Vancouver city councils and other local agencies will follow with their own votes. But leading among the alternatives is a new, 12-lane toll bridge with a light-rail line attached.

In that scenario, it is likely that congestion and pollution will be higher than bridge planners have forecast. And the higher-capacity bridge could move the I-5 bottleneck southward, closer to central Portland, where the freeway is chronically congested.

Here's how we got here:

In making their designs, bridge planners had assistance from specialists with the Metro regional government. Though Metro is nationally known for using sophisticated computer tools to study sprawl and the role of highways in it, Metro's modeling staff heeded requests by Columbia River Crossing staff to assume that all bridge solutions would have no influence on development patterns in North Portland and southwest Washington.

They did so, according to Metro's chief traffic forecaster, to be free of the complex forces driving growth as they designed the five bridge scenarios.

"Essentially that was a simplifying assumption to assess what the difference might be between the

infrastructure changes," said Richard Walker, travel forecasting manager for Metro.

Metro Councilor Rex Burkholder, who represents North and Northeast Portland, defended the approach, saying it would allow a better comparison among the bridge alternatives.

"If you let land use change as part of that, then you're not going to be able to compare those alternatives on a fair basis," Burkholder said.

But simplifying assumptions are "exactly what modeling is not supposed to do," said Todd Litman, of the Victoria Transport Policy Institute in Canada, also cited in Columbia River Crossing's own environmental impact statement. "Modeling allows you to do more detailed, case-appropriate analysis."

Other experts agreed.

Not taking growth into account is "flat out wrong," said Reid Ewing, a research professor at the National Center for Smart Growth at the University of Maryland, also a recent guest speaker and adviser to Metro on global warming issues.

Widening a highway on the northern part of the metro area would make it easier for residents to commute to downtown Portland from there than from other directions, Ewing said. So they're more likely to move there, which fills the expanded highway with more traffic.

"People can drive from subdivisions that are miles away from the facility and then to other employment sites or destinations," Ewing said. "Ripple effects go out quite a distance from the facilities themselves. Five miles would be a timid estimate of how far out those effects are."

Burkholder stands his ground. Tolls on the bridge would limit potential growth in the corridor, Burkholder said. And land-use regulations that limit sprawl can compensate for the easier travel a new bridge will allow, he said.

"Nothing we do transportationwise will solve our land-use problems," he said. "It takes political will to make it function."

Burkholder also said agency planners told him that a new bridge would boost growth in outer Clark County and also in downtown Vancouver, a scenario that Vancouver and Oregon leaders promote as an antidote to sprawl.

Yet when it comes to fighting sprawl with land-use rules, Burkholder said, Washington state is "10 years behind" Portland's Metro, but improving.

Change the traffic and growth assumptions, and the project's air quality assumptions should also change, Ewing said. That's because more traffic will add to pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, he said -- despite Columbia River Crossing's claims that newer vehicles running at higher speeds, even in greater number, would produce less.

The 2001 report on the I-5 corridor, issued by a panel of Oregon and Washington representatives, warned that widening the highway and adding light rail could increase demand for housing in Clark County at the expense of other parts of the region.

"Additional housing demand will increase the political pressure to disproportionately expand the Clark County urban growth area along the I-5 corridor to the north," the report says. "The greater the travel time savings relative to other corridors, the larger the redistribution."

And it examines the relationship of other traffic problems in the region to I-5: If Oregon 217 in Beaverton is not widened and the Sunrise Corridor in Clackamas County isn't built, "then the effect of the capacity increases in the I-5 corridor would be greater," the report states.

The warnings are found in the Findings and Policy Recommendations report of the land-use committee of the Portland/Vancouver I-5 Transportation and Trade Partnership.

The Oregonian sought a copy of the report from the Metro regional government but was told by a Metro spokesperson the report "did not exist," and, later, that only a two-page summary existed. The Oregonian obtained the full report from Columbia River Crossing staff.

Growth implications of the project can be consequential.

In cases from Chicago to Vermont, environmental groups have obtained federal court orders that required highway planners to redo their traffic forecasts to account for induced development, Ewing said. Such litigation and new study can cause years of delay.

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