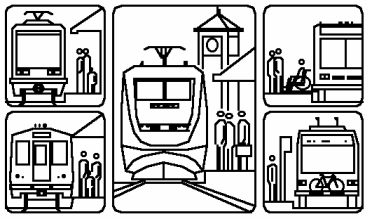
Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates
AORTA • P. O. Box 2772 • Portland, Oregon 97208-2772
Also known as OreARP • Oregon Association of Railway Passengers
Phone & Fax: 503-241-7185 • OregonRail@netscape.com • www.aortarail.org



April 11, 2006

AORTA's critique of the Columbia River Crossing Draft Components Step "A" Screening Report *(March 22, 2006)*

The report claims the Non-Freeway Multi-Modal Columbia River Crossing (Figure 5-23) failed component screening questions Q.1, Q.3, Q.4 and Q.6, assumes "it is not feasible to raise the existing I-5 Bridges" and recommends dropping commuter rail from further consideration. We disagree. Following is our rebuttal.

Non-Freeway Multi-Modal Columbia River Crossing

Question 1: Does the Component increase Vehicular Capacity or Decrease Vehicle Demand within the Bridge Influence Area?

Yes, the multi-modal bridge meets both of these requirements. The freeway bridges would gain another through lane each way because they would no longer have to accommodate the acceleration lanes from the northbound and southbound approach ramps. As long as the main stem of the freeway remains at six lanes, there will be no need for additional freeway lanes across the river.

The multi-modal bridge will add three to five additional lanes across the river for local and southbound freeway access traffic. It also will carry light rail, which would significantly reduce vehicle demand.

Out of direction travel is not a major issue. The local access provided Hayden Island would more than offset the additional few minutes that will be required to travel to and from I-5 north through the Marine Drive Interchange.

Commuter rail, in concert with light rail would further reduce vehicle demand. See later comments regarding commuter rail.

Question 3: Does the Component Improve Freight Mobility Within the BIA?

Yes. Local access and light rail improve freight mobility by providing desirable alternatives for commuters, thus reducing congestion for trucks.

In addition, improvements to the freight rail infrastructure that are needed and planned within the bridge influence area will reduce rail freight congestion, thus reducing the demand on motor freight. The assumption expressed in the report that the rate of growth for motor freight will be faster than rail freight is probably inaccurate given increasing fuel costs and the government finally recognizing that investment in railroad infrastructure is in the public interest. For example, Oregon will invest $100 million in the next few years on non-highway transportation infrastructure through the Connect Oregon Plan.

Question 4: Does the Component Improve Safety and Decrease Vulnerability to Incidents within the BIA?

Yes. In addition to reducing traffic demand it improves freeway geometry, reduces the number of closely spaced ramps and lengthens weave distances.
The grade and vertical sight distance can be improved at the north end of the bridge by eliminating the lift span and raising the trusses. The tight southbound on ramp from downtown Vancouver and SR 14 is eliminated by routing this traffic over the multi-modal bridge on a separate auxiliary lane. Both Hayden Island ramps to and from I-5 north are eliminated providing longer, safer weaves on Hayden Island. Greater northbound capacity is provided from marine Drive by adding another lane on the Portland Harbor Bridge.

Shoulder standards required for new structures by the FHWA are not possible on the existing bridge structures, but these are not new structures. Shoulders on the Marquam Bridge do not meet current standards either and it should be noted that the cross section of a possible tunnel, illustrated in this report, shows substandard shoulders.

The geometry of the freeway north of the bridge can be modified or speed standards reduced if sight lines don't meet 70MPH freeway standards in this segment.

Question 6: Does the Component Reduce Seismic Risk of the Columbia River Crossing?

Yes. Eliminating the lift towers and the heavy counter weights greatly reduce the seismic risk. In addition, the piers could be further stabilized with additional peripheral piling and the trusses could be more securely anchored to the piers. We suspect the cost of seismic upgrading would be insignificant compared to the cost of a new bridge or tunnel.

It is curious that in the report, this option (RC-22) failed this component but options RC-7 through RC-13 that retained the existing bridges with their vulnerable towers passed with an "Unknown (insufficient information)" rating.

Feasibility of raising existing Bridges

Raising both of the bridges is feasible. The northbound bridge was raised to match the "hump" in the southbound bridge constructed in the 1950s. Although not explained in the report, we suspect the alleged reasons have to do with navigational clearances.

Currently, most commercial river traffic forgoes the lift span in favor of the "hump" despite the need to make a 'S' turn maneuver between the highway and railroad bridges. It has been strongly recommended by the barge and rail companies that federal funds be invested in the railroad bridge by replacing the existing swing span with a wider lift span that would align with the "hump". This change may occur before the commencement of this highway project.

If the long span (#5 on the attached diagram) could be raised high enough to meet the Coast Guard's clearance requirements for essential river traffic, the main channel could then be moved south and the lift spans decommissioned. The bridge raising option should not be eliminated prior to this determination.

The Non-Freeway Multi-Modal Bridge we propose does not depend upon raising the existing bridges or eliminating the lift spans. However, if the lift spans are not eliminated, the new bridge would also need a lift span aligned with them.

Commuter Rail

Commuter rail operating on existing regional rail tracks would greatly improve public transit service in the Bridge Influence Area. The stated claim that it would be infeasible to integrate with the existing bus and rail network is absurd. Throughout the world, commuter rail stations become hubs for local transit systems allowing seamless access to and from destinations far beyond the train stations which are not just park and ride lots.

We acknowledge that commuter rail was not recommended in the "I-5 Rail Capacity Study" (Feb. 2003). This conclusion was based on a cursory commuter rail analysis done by ODOT of only one rather ambitious commuter rail scenario, which assumed that the freight rail infrastructure in the Influence Area would experience only modest incremental upgrades. A more conservative phased development of commuter rail, combined with a more aggressive freight rail infrastructure improvement plan, was never studied or vetted.

For example, peak hour commuter rail service between Ridgefield and Union Station in the Amtrak corridor is feasible if combined with the incremental improvements and grade separation of the UPRR and BNSF rail lines at N. Portland Junction recommended in the Rail Capacity Report. Such rail infrastructure improvements are practical to accomplish within the time frame of the I-5 project, especially now that there is growing cooperation between the Class I railroads and state and local governments to share in the cost of rail improvements.

Contact:
Jim Howell
503 284-7182
jimhowell89@hotmail.com