

Summary of the Vancouver BNSF Rail Bridge Project

From: Ad-Hoc Steering Committee for the Vancouver Rail Bridge Upgrade Project:

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The Request

We are asking JPACT that the Vancouver Rail Bridge Project be included as a high priority of the Regional Transportation Plan.

The Project

The project is to replace the existing “swing span” with a “lift span” and place it closer to the middle of the river.

The Problem

1. **Opening Too Narrow.** The current opening is too narrow. At less than 200 feet wide, it was built (in 1908) to handle much smaller paddlewheel-type freight vessels; today’s tows are often over 600 feet long and over 80 feet wide. If there is current, wind or fog, passage can be very difficult and dangerous. Because of the way the bridge opens, with the swing span turning parallel to the navigation channel, the opening is analogous to a tunnel, forcing tows to line up and head straight through, without any significant ability to slide through to compensate for wind or current. This requires considerable forward momentum in order to maintain course, which only adds to the danger of a catastrophe in the event of a miscalculation.
2. **I-5 Bridge Problems.** The navigational difficulties for downbound tows are compounded by the nearby I-5 bridge. The distance between the bridges is barely adequate to allow the difficult maneuvers required to safely negotiate the bridge openings. Although the rail bridge opening is reasonably well lined up with the I-5 lifts (both are near the Washington shore), captains do not call for these lifts when they can be avoided, nor are they allowed to use them during the peak traffic periods of morning and evening “rush hour” (6:30-9 AM and 2:30-6PM). So they usually navigate under the I-5 bridges’ higher spans toward the middle of the river, which require tows to make a difficult “S” turn to line up with the narrow rail bridge opening. This maneuver

becomes more dangerous as river levels rise and currents increase. When the river reaches 6 feet at the Vancouver gauge, the maneuver (through the high span) becomes too dangerous, and captains use the I-5 lifts. In years of high run-off, the river can remain above 6 feet for 6 or 7 months at a time.

3. **Increasing Danger.** The dangers to tug & barge tows from a miscalculated maneuver are obvious and immediate, with the possibilities for loss of life and property a constant consideration for towboat captains. With increasing I-5 traffic, there has been increased pressure on captains to avoid using the lifts, and in 1999 the Coast Guard extended the length of rush-hour closures of the lifts. Thus the danger of a miscalculation has steadily increased. If a tow were to hit and disable the rail bridge (the closest alternative is east of The Dalles, at Wishram), the cost to the regional economy would be enormous.

The Benefits of a Relocated Lift Span

1. **Safer Navigation.** If a rail bridge lift span is placed nearer the middle of the river, towboat captains will be able to use the higher spans of the I-5 without making the dangerous “S” turns to line up with the opening. The lift span would be about 300 feet wide if it were placed on current pier structures, making it a much safer opening for marine traffic, and of course, the “tunnel” effect would be eliminated.
2. **Faster Opening.** A lift opening could be made considerably faster than the present swing opening, resulting in less disruption to rail traffic.
3. **Significant I-5 Traffic Benefits.** A lift opening placed more toward the middle of the river would allow marine traffic to nearly always avoid using the I-5 lifts. Of course, each time a captain calls for an I-5 bridge lift, all I-5 traffic comes to a dead halt to wait for the tow to pass through. It is precisely analogous to a rail crossing on the freeway. Nowhere else in the country has such a lift been allowed to remain on the interstate highway system. WSDOT calculated that the current average annual cost of lifts in I-5 traffic delay is about \$0.8 million and will steadily increase to a projected annual cost of \$12 million by 2021. Currently a lift causes about 20 minutes in midday traffic delay, but by 2021 the midday delay is estimated to exceed 90 minutes. Compounding the problem is that the current rush hours, with very slow, full capacity traffic, will grow to include the entire mid-day period. Thus lifts will cause greater disruptions to traffic and freight mobility.

4. **Part of Existing Plan.** The project is part of an existing regional plan for improving I-5 freight and traffic mobility, for it is included in the Final Recommendations of the I-5 Trade and Transportation Partnership Strategic Plan. Although the Partnership study focused on the highway traffic problems of the I-5 corridor, it concluded that a modification of the rail bridge would have important positive impacts on traffic and freight mobility within the I-5 corridor.
5. **Planning for New I-5 Bridge.** The proposal would permit planners of a new I-5 crossing much greater flexibility, for the lifts at the north end of the bridge could be eliminated. This would result in lower construction costs and would eliminate a large annual budget currently allocated to lift operations and maintenance. Removal of the lift towers would also increase safety for aircraft using the nearby Pearson airfield.

Cost

Truman-Hobbs officials assumed the project would cost about \$42 million. This assumption was based on an unrelated study by SW Washington RTC for adding a third track to the bridge, and was considered relevant because it also contemplated adding a lift. However, the figure must be considered an educated guess, rather than resulting from an actual cost analysis.

Funding Considerations

1. **Truman-Hobbs.** The CRTA initiated a “Truman-Hobbs” proceeding in 1999 to have the Coast Guard declare the rail bridge an “unreasonable hazard to navigation,” thereby making it eligible for a federally funded modification under the Truman-Hobbs Act. After convening a hearing in Portland (March 2002), where testimony was taken from towboat captains and a wide variety of river interests, the District (Eighth Coast Guard District, located in St. Louis) recommended that the rail bridge be modified. But then in early 2003, Coast Guard Headquarters overruled the District, on the grounds that the project did not after all meet the cost/benefit requirements of its regulations, partly because the bridge has not been hit often enough, and partly because the benefits to I-5 traffic could not be considered. Headquarters also declined to consider the increasing danger of future accidents (which are inevitable, according to towboat captains’ testimony) because of I-5 lift restrictions. Nor did Headquarters consider the massive disruption to freight movement that is likely to result from a major incident at the bridge, or the national security implications of such a disruption.

2. **Falling Through the Cracks - The Funding Conundrum.** The rail bridge project is truly multi-modal. It has significant benefits for marine safety as well as for highway traffic and freight mobility, and it also provides some benefits to rail from a faster opening. But with the failure of Truman-Hobbs, there appears to be no single agency, federal or state, with the ability to take on the project and provide the funding. The bridge is private property, after all, and is not within the traditional jurisdiction of any highway department (even though they are now called transportation departments), and although the railroad owner is subject to the oversight of the Federal Railroad Administration, the FRA has no legal ability to order a rail improvement for the primary benefit of marine and highway traffic. The Coast Guard has the legal ability to order a rail bridge improvement for the benefit of marine safety, but declines to use highway benefits in making its cost/benefit analysis to justify such an order.

3. **The Solution – Congressionally Mandated Truman-Hobbs.** However, Congress can declare on its own that the bridge is an unreasonable hazard to navigation, and it can direct the Coast Guard to apply Truman-Hobbs procedures. This has been done for other bridge projects. Thus, the Coast Guard would conduct the engineering study, do the EIS, and contract the entire project from beginning to end. The Coast Guard’s Truman-Hobbs director at headquarters has indicated that their Congressional liaison office will work with our Congressional representatives to properly craft the necessary legislation. However, considering the benefits to I-5 traffic (as well as benefits to Amtrak and other federally supported rail projects from the new lift), funding would come from sources other than Truman-Hobbs, for which it technically does not qualify and which currently lacks sufficient funding in any event.

4. **Authorization under TEA-21.** Since the project could very well be characterized as providing a solution to a transportation safety and mobility problem at a nationally significant multi-modal crossing on a major freight corridor, we intend to seek federal highway trust funding, and we will target bridge discretionary and other funding as part of a funding package. To achieve authorization under SAFETEA, we seek the support of the various transportation committees in both states, particularly JPACT, for inclusion within the Regional Transportation Plan system as a high priority, while recognizing that funding for the project may come from sources not used to forecast the financially constrained Regional Transportation Plan.

Project Support

In addition to support from the maritime community (CRTA, Columbia River Pilots, Port of Vancouver, Port of Portland, Pacific Northwest Waterways Association) and the Vancouver business community (Identity Clark County), the project received official support at the Truman-Hobbs hearing from the following:

Senators Patty Murray, Maria Cantwell, Gordon Smith and Ron Wyden
Representatives Brian Baird, Earl Blumenauer, Peter Defazio, Darlene Hooley, Greg Walden and David Wu

WSDOT, ODOT, City of Portland, Metro

We expect support from these and others in our effort to seek funding for the project under a modified Truman-Hobbs approach, and have begun discussions with Congressional staffs about crafting the appropriate legislation.