

Public comment on the Interstate Bridge Replacement Program November 2024

In January, 2000, the Oregon and Washington departments of transportation issued a joint report on the Interstate 5 corridor, titled “Portland/Vancouver I-5 Trade Corridor: Freight Feasibility and Needs Assessment.” The “Summary of Findings” in the Executive Summary of that report presented the following major points:

- Interstate 5 is the primary economic lifeline on the West Coast. The most economically significant segment of I-5 in the Portland/Vancouver region is in North Portland and Vancouver, where the freeway intersects with the Columbia River. Here, the interstate provides access to deep-water shipping, up-river barging, and two water-level transcontinental rail lines.
- Interstate 5 is currently the most congested segment of the regional freeway system in the Portland/Vancouver area. Without attention, future congestion in this important transportation corridor threatens the livability and economic promise of the Portland/Vancouver region.
- To maintain the economic competitiveness of the Portland/Vancouver region, and to maintain the high quality of life, this region needs to develop a Strategic Plan for managing demand in the I-5 Trade Corridor and making a balanced set of improvements in the corridor. To keep up with mobility needs in the corridor, there must be highway, transit, and freight and passenger rail improvements, along with demand management. No single strategy will solve the problems in the corridor. There is no silver bullet.
- Improvements in the corridor will be costly and most cannot be funded with existing transportation revenue. It is possible, however, to fund public improvements in the I-5 Trade Corridor with a combination of federal funds, tolling, and state funding from Oregon and Washington.

It is clear to me that the current Interstate Bridge Replacement Program does **NOT** adequately address these points. In fact, it contradicts the statement “No single strategy will solve the problems in the corridor. There is no silver bullet.” Quite the contrary; the IBR is presented as a silver bullet that will supposedly solve the complex transportation issues in this corridor. It will not.

Rather, what is needed is “to develop a Strategic Plan for managing demand ... and making a balanced set of improvements in the corridor. ... [T]here must be highway, transit, and freight and passenger rail improvements, along with demand management.” A single high-elevation freeway mega-bridge is not a balanced approach to this problem.

What is needed in this corridor includes improvements for not only private rubber-tire roadway vehicles, but also rail (both freight and passenger) and waterway navigation. Demand management is also a critical part of solving congestion in this corridor—reducing the number of vehicles crossing the river. Finally, greenhouse gas emission reduction has since emerged as a critical issue, further highlighting the need for a balanced approach to improving traffic movement.

Demand management—not even addressed in the current proposal—needs to be a fundamental part of this project. Reducing the number of rubber-tire vehicles traveling through this corridor could free up space for the critical commercial freight traffic so important to the economic vitality of our region. Private automobile traffic could be reduced with an effective public transit system and active

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transportation facilities. Even the volume of commercial truck traffic could be reduced, by shifting some freight to rail—a much more fuel-efficient and environmentally friendly mode of transportation.

The most egregious omission of the current IBR program is the lack of consideration of two alternative options:

- A lower bridge with a lift span
- An immersed tunnel

In addition to decreasing both the cost and the environmental destruction required by the project, either of these options would immensely improve the seismic safety of the river crossing. A 116-foot-high mega-bridge, on the other hand, would *NOT* be seismically safe, no matter how sturdily it is built; in fact, it might even be less safe than the current bridge, during an earthquake. It would also present a significant barrier to active transportation travelers, requiring them to negotiate a height equivalent to a six-story building. (It is noteworthy that none of the rendered views of the proposed bridge has shown a close-up from below, as viewed by a pedestrian, wheelchair user or bicyclist.)

Furthermore, improvements to the railroad bridge just downstream from the current I-5 bridge could reduce the number of lifts required for the highway bridge by ninety percent, by replacing the swing span in that bridge with a lift span closer to the center of the river. Such an improvement would benefit both highway bridge users and waterway traffic, and at a much lower cost than the proposed mega-bridge.

Even though the railroad bridge is privately owned by BNSF Railroad, it also functions as a public good, and a serious effort should be made, to negotiate with the bridge owner; public money is available for such improvements.

In short, the current IBR proposal (whose very name broadcasts the message that it focuses on only one small part of the transportation challenges in this corridor) is, to say the least, incomplete. This is a grave disservice to taxpayers, who must fund this project, to the commercial shippers who rely on this connection for their livelihoods, and to all travelers through this corridor.

I strongly urge the planners to take a broader look at this project, as our two states' departments of transportation did in 2000, and come back with a plan that is lower cost and less destructive to the physical and social environments, and that actually solves the problems with the current configuration. Our region, and future generations, deserve no less.

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