Financial reality and the I-5 bridge replacement

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The newly re-christened I-5 bridge replacement project has learned none of the lessons that doomed the Columbia River Crossing. ODOT and WSDOT aren't being honest about how much this project will cost, and who will pay, and have designed a project that will make traffic congestion worse while wasting billions of dollars.

The I-5 Bridge replacement cannot be built without tolls. Six years ago, ODOT's financial consultants said that the CRC would require one way tolls of $3.60 for cars and $10 for trucks will be needed to finance the $3 billion project. This project would likely require even higher tolls. You need to be honest with the region's travelers and ask them whether they would be willing to pay this much, and likely more, for this project.

If you toll I-5, you also have to toll I-205. Tolling just the I-5 bridge will produce massive diversion to the I-205 bridge. If road users have a choice of a free I-205 compared to a $3.50 or more (each way) crossing of I-5, I-205 will be overwhelmed. The Investment Grade Analysis showed that I-205 would have gridlock while the new I-5 bridge be dramatically under utilized.

Unless you are willing to embrace tolling for both the I-5 and I-205 bridges, this project will be both a financial and a transportation disaster.

If we have to toll anyway, we should toll first, and build only later, when we see how much capacity is actually needed when travelers have to pay for crossing the Columbia. The evidence from other cities that have tolled previously free crossings is that traffic will likely drop by 40 percent or more. Louisville added a $1 toll to its I-65 bridge, and traffic dropped by 40 percent. Building first and tolling later means that billions of dollars will be wasted on capacity that no one values highly enough to pay for.

This project will aggravate climate change. More capacity generates more traffic and more pollution. Transportation is the largest and fastest growing source of greenhouse gases in the Portland area. Transportation greenhouse gases have increased by 1,000 pounds per person in the Portland area in the past five years. Both Oregon and Washington have state laws that mandate a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, and this project violates them by explicitly planning for a huge increase in car traffic, from about 130,000 vehicles per day today, to 180,000 vehicles per day, according to the CRC environmental impact statement. Widening freeways is climate arson.

This project will be hugely expensive. The total cost of the now abandoned Columbia River Crossing was more than $3 billion; currently construction costs are increasing 3 to 6 percent per year, which means this project will likely cost more than $4 billion. The CRC budget was based on false assumptions that the federal government would provide a $450 million earmark and that the federal government would pay for 90 percent of transit costs through an un-tested stealth earmark. ODOT has shown no ability to manage costs of major projects, which have routinely gone 100-200 percent over budget. Actual tolls could be much higher than ODOT's 2014 estimates of a $3.60 one way car toll and a $10 one-way truck toll.

Toll first, build later (and right-size the project). The CRC failed because ODOT and WSDOT put off dealing with hard financial questions until after they'd spent more than $200 million on planning. Their investment grade analysis, released in 2014, showed that tolls would have to be dramatically higher than originally promised in the project EIS (more than double for off peak users) in order to finance the project. Oregon and Washington lawmakers have an obligation to be honest about who will pay for this project and how much it will cost, and do so

from the beginning. Otherwise it is doomed to fail for the same reasons that sank the CRC. Oregon's Legislature has already directed ODOT to implement pricing on Portland area freeways; Washington routinely uses variable pricing on congested roadways in the Seattle area.

Tolling is the only way to reduce road congestion. If we want to provide fast and predictable travel times in the Portland area and between Vancouver and Portland, the only way to do so is to implement congestion pricing on the region's freeways. ODOT studies show that a very modest level of tolling on area freeways would provide much faster travel times with the current level of freeway capacity, and provide funding to maintain the system and enhance transportation alternatives. The experience with the pandemic has shown that traffic demand management—keeping area freeway's traffic levels just below the level that causes them to become congested, actually enables more cars to travel faster at the peak hour. It's time we started managing our expensive transportation system, rather than allowing it to be overrun and break down nearly every day.

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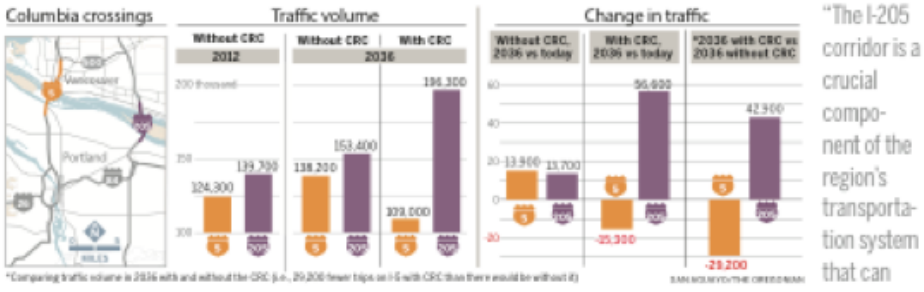
CRC to push gridlock east

A new, tolled I-5 bridge will lead to a big jump in traffic on the I-205 span, a report says

ASSOCIATED PRESS/2005 JAMIE FRANCIS/THE OREGONIAN/2012

A report says that if the Interstate 5 bridge (left) is replaced by a tolled Columbia River Crossing, daily traffic on the Interstate 205 bridge (right) is projected at 196,300 — 42,900 vehicles more than if the CRC were not built. That level of traffic would push the I-205 span to its capacity.



*Comparing traffic volume in 2036 with and without the CRC (i.e., 29,200 fewer trips on I-5 with CRC than there would be without it)

"The I-205 corridor is a crucial component of the region's transportation system that can