

Testimony to Joint Interim Committee on the Interstate 5 Bridge

The Executive Summary section of the 'Portland/Vancouver I-5 Trade Corridor' report, published jointly by ODOT and WSDOT, 27 January 2000, states:

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....

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.... The complexity of the problem requires that the new capacity be multi-faceted. It should include highway, transit, rail and demand management, while supporting the vitality of the river-based economy.... No single strategy will solve the problems in the corridor. There is no silver bullet.

Yet the current IBR project does propose a "silver bullet," focusing only on the highway element of this formula, ignoring the equally important rail and river traffic. In fact, it proposes to impair river transportation in order to "improve" highway transportation—simply by trying to increase the travel speed of rubber-tire vehicles as they move through the corridor.

There are two improvements that could be made to the IBR project, that would benefit all modes of transportation here: a lower-level new highway bridge with a lift span, and improvements to the BNSF-owned railroad bridge downstream.

Replacing the poorly placed swing span opening on the railroad bridge with a more centrally located lift span would improve the travel path for ships and barges, reducing the need for lifts on the highway bridge by at least 90%, and those remaining 10% of lifts could be scheduled for non-commute hours. While it is true that the railroad bridge is privately owned, that does not mean that no public money would be available to fund improvements to it. This suggested change constitutes a waterway navigation improvement, and could be largely funded with federal money, completely separate from the highway bridge funding.

And, if the new highway bridge has a lift span, there is no need to build a 116-foot-high bridge; the bridge could be much lower, like the current bridge. This reduced height would be much cheaper to build, more accessible for bicyclists and pedestrians, and safer for all travel modes. In fact, if making the new bridge seismically safe is one of the goals, building a 116-foot-high bridge is counterproductive; lower bridges are much safer in earthquakes than high bridges.

I urge you, our public officials, to consider these changes to the current "Locally Preferred Alternative". They would save a great deal of taxpayer money and improve both mobility and safety for all users of this critical transportation corridor.

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