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GUEST OPINION

Light rail's the answer

MY VIEW • Mass-transit line to Washington may save billions

BY JIM HOWELL

, Mar 23, 2007 (29 Reader comments)

According to the Columbia River Crossing staff, the Interstate Bridge between Oregon and Washington has a 5,400-vehicle-per-hour capacity.

Current demand exceeds that capacity for at least four hours during peak traffic times, causing stop-and-go traffic.

If this demand could be reduced with aggressive transit service, no additional freeway capacity would be needed and billions of dollars could be saved.

But a transit solution to the Columbia River Crossing problem has never been given serious consideration.

A light-rail extension on its own bridge to downtown Vancouver, Wash., could more than double the crossing capacity of the current freeway bridges. Light rail can carry 9,000 passengers an hour in each direction with a train every two minutes. This is the equivalent of a 10-lane freeway.

With this capacity, all that is missing is the development of high-frequency transit systems in Clark County and Portland that would effectively feed the light-rail line.

The cost of providing these systems has never been established. It could be the most cost-effective solution to the Columbia Crossing traffic problem.

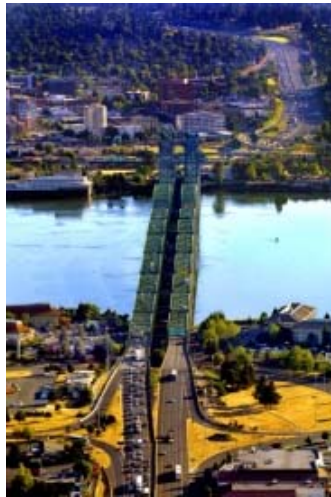
Vancouver, British Columbia, faced a similar traffic problem back in the early '70s when traffic congestion on the Lions Gate Bridge over the Burrard Inlet — a body of water between Vancouver and North Vancouver — was reaching critical mass.

Planners gave serious consideration to building another bridge but, instead, opted for a public transportation solution. The solution was a combination of effective bus service in both communities, connected by a frequent and rapid passenger ferry service.

Now, 30 years later, they've added light rail and commuter rail to the system. They also are building a metro subway and adding another ferryboat. They are not building another bridge.

This illustrates how a well-designed, integrated public transportation system can be a highly effective way for large numbers of people to get where they want to go, when they want to go, without their cars.

Given the city of Portland's recent resolution to reduce oil consumption by 50 percent in 25 years and our state's concerns for global warming, a transit solution to the Columbia River Crossing issue should be considered before any freeway project is initiated.



The Interstate 5 bridge between Portland and Vancouver, Wash., exceeds its capacity at least four hours a day, according to a light-rail advocate who says a commuter-rail bridge could alleviate the problem. L.E. BASKOW / PORTLAND TRIBUNE

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Perhaps a light-rail bridge that would help reduce vehicular fuel consumption could be partly funded with offset payments mandated by the state from power companies wanting to build new power plants that create additional carbon dioxide emissions.

Jim Howell is a former transit service planner at TriMet and is a director of the Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates.

Reader comments

Re: Light rail's the answer

Jim - I think your experience as a "Planner" has clouded your judgement. Mass transit is not a solution to all transportation ills. An unbalanced approach, like has been imposed on the residents within the Tri-Met service area has proven to be unsuccessful. "Smart Growth" solutions are and have been a failure. Many residents think 4 years is to long to rebuild Iraq, but 40 years is an acceptable period to solve our Traffic Congestion that has not only been planned for, but lauded by politicians and bureaucrats as an example of "Smart Growth" "Planning". Show me an example of how Mass Transit is economical, simple to use, Reduces Congestion and what's "Smart" about it.

"Mark"

(Not verified)

Fri, Mar 23, 2007 at 01:24 AM

Re: Light rail's the answer

Thank you, Mr. Howell. \$6B plus just to move the bottleneck further south and clog the Portland area with more traffic and emissions is clearly the wrong path to follow. You seem to have identified a very logical alternative. For the benefit of everyone living in Portland, let's hope this gains serious traction.

"DR"

(Not verified)

Fri, Mar 23, 2007 at 07:29 AM

You assume way too much

Just because the capacity could 'theoretically' support that many users over the bridge, you have to make a big assumption that people would be inconvenienced enough to actually use it. Think about the population of Vancouver Washington for a moment. It is no where near as dense as the Portland Metro area due to different planning processes and densities in that area. So, how many train lines/branches on Max would you have to build in order to feed that kind of capacity over the Columbia? Running a line up I-5 or across SR-500 with a dozen or so stops isn't going to feed that kind of volume. It's simple math but no one seems to run the numbers on these things to make their case. It would be a travesty to spend a lot of resources to 'fix' the bridge congestion only to see little to no impact for a train only solution. Even the Federal government (who has been a big MAX supporter and funder) is starting to question this logic and rightly so.

(Not verified)

Fri, Mar 23, 2007 at 08:02 AM

Re: Light rail's the answer

To make mass transit work, it has to be available, viable and attractive. Too many planners think they can cram it down peoples' throats. And that's been the plan ever since Goldschmidt was mayor.

When I was working in Portland, I often took MAX when I lived on the East side and later when I moved to Tigard, I usually took the bus. But it wasn't convenient to do ALL the time. There were occasions I had to take my car to work for various reason. But the reason I took MAX and the bus was because it was easy, they were on time, etc. It was an attractive alternative. That's the way to do it.

I agree that MAX should be an alternative available to people and I

