

October 25, 2005 Open House Presentations Q & A Notes

The following summarizes discussion between meeting attendees and Jay Lyman, Columbia River Crossing Consultant Team Project Manager, during two open house presentations on Tuesday, October 25, 2005, at Clark College in Vancouver, Washington.

Project Jurisdiction/Approval and Public Input

Jurisdiction

Several audience members inquired as to which agencies have authority for approval of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process and the final alternative. Lyman explained that the Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration require a NEPA analysis that produces an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). The two agencies must approve the process and issue a Record of Decision before the project can move to design and construction.

Members of the audience asked about the official process by which the project would be approved. Lyman explained that the local project sponsors must approve the NEPA process and chosen alternative. These sponsors are the Oregon and Washington departments of transportation, Metro, the Regional Transportation Council, Tri-Met, C-TRAN, and the cities of Vancouver and Portland. Once the sponsors have approved, the regional administrators of the Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration have authority and must sign the Record of Decision.

Public Input

Additional discussion ensued regarding how the public and the region's stakeholders can influence decisions regarding the chosen alternative. Lyman explained that the selected alternative must be acceptable to the region as well as the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Transit Administration. The project must follow a review process that is inclusive, transparent, and reflects the values and needs of people living and working in our region and the users of the interstate system.

Public involvement in the Columbia River Crossing project is varied and substantial. It includes a representative Task Force (its meetings are open to the public), public meetings, outreach to community groups and leaders, and Web-based outreach, as well as engaging underrepresented communities.

Project Timeline

Several meeting attendees expressed concern about growing congestion, delays in freight delivery, and increasing commute times and asked if the project schedule could be compressed. Lyman explained that the 3-year projection is actually aggressive for an EIS; the process is complicated and includes collaboration between two states and jurisdictions from each state. He stressed that the project team

wants to move through the NEPA process quickly, but they also need to ensure that the public and other stakeholders have the opportunity to participate.

Transit

Attendees asked about a transit component on a new structure and about the meaning of “high capacity transit.” Lyman said the project could include an express bus on a dedicated road, a high occupancy vehicle lane, or light rail. The audience asked additional questions about the efficiency of light rail, to which Lyman responded that the capacity of light rail depends on the configuration of the system, such as the number of trains per hour and the capacity of each.

Audience members asked whether light rail could be put on the existing Burlington Northern/Santa Fe railroad bridge. Lyman explained that this idea had been raised in the I-5 Partnership process, and that analysis to date made it unlikely. Several options would be studied, including multiple transit routes.

Funding & Cost Estimates

An attendee asked what proportion of the project would be federally funded. Lyman said funding allocation is undetermined and that the project likely would be a mix of state and federal funding. Both state and federal funding are being used to pay for the NEPA process.

In response to a question, Lyman said cost estimates would be part of the public record and available upon request. Cost estimates for project design and construction would be formulated much later in the NEPA process.

Bridge Structure

An audience member asked about the projected life span of the bridges. Lyman answered that, while the two current structures continue to be useful, maintenance costs and seismic stability are two of the issues that the EIS would study. Some maintenance may be done before a new structure is constructed.

Traffic Congestion & Safety

Several questions involved traffic projections, congestion, and safety. Entrance and exit ramps are perceived to cause accidents. Lyman said ramp and other safety issues would be addressed in the EIS.

Other attendees asked about predicting future traffic, and Lyman explained that forecasts are based on designated land uses and population growth. Local trips and through traffic, along with land use and population, would be examined to provide a good picture of future traffic counts, and these forecasts would be included in the EIS.

Attendees asked whether reducing freeway access and other structural modifications would affect congestion. Lyman stated that the EIS would examine how to improve the existing interchanges between the 5-mile segment between SR 500 in Washington and Columbia Boulevard in Oregon – the Bridge Influence Area – rather than on reducing the number of interchanges.

Ideas

Several comments centered on the need for an additional bridge. Some audience members suggested that connecting roads and highways, and a highly built environment in the Bridge Influence Area would significantly constrain a new I-5 bridge. An audience member asked if a new bypass to the west would relieve congestion and provide more land on which to build a new bridge and roadway

connections. Lyman noted that prior studies had concluded that a west side bypass would do little to address congestion in the I-5 corridor, and would have substantial land use and environmental impacts.

An attendee asked if the project included the I-5 and I-84 merge near the Rose Quarter because of the impacts of congestion at that location on the same freeway system. Lyman stated that the I-84 merger is considered a separate project.

Some attendees commented on high capacity transit, and Lyman assured the audience that some element of high capacity transit would be included in the EIS. Others asked about the number of lanes on the new structure. Lyman answered that, while the project would utilize some work from the I-5 Partnership process, including its suggestions on lane numbers and use, the NEPA process requires the analysis of all alternatives.