

Testimony of Robert Liberty Before the Portland Design Commission on the Interstate Bridge Replacement Project

June 2, 2022

This testimony is submitted by Robert Liberty. I reside at 3431A SE Tibbetts Street in Portland.

Summary & Recommended Design Commission Action

There are many cheaper, greener, smarter and more equitable alternatives to the massive I-5 widening project proposed by the staff of the Interstate Bridge Replacement Program (IBRP.) The IBRP proposed alternative is ugly, out of scale, contradicts city and regional policy on climate change, provide the most benefits to affluent white commuters while congesting traffic and polluting the air of diverse neighborhoods adjoining I-205. Its construction cost and likely cost overruns will deprive other, much more worthy projects of funding, The Design Commission does not legal authority over the project but it does have moral authority to recommend something better to the City Commission.

Recommended actions:

- Send a recommendation to the City Commission to reject this proposal and consider other, cheaper, greener, smarter and more equitable alternatives.
- Alternatively, defer discussion until the IBRP project staff or city staff provide renderings of the proposed project as seen from pedestrian and other perspectives from Marine Drive, and different locations on Hayden Island.
- Schedule another Commission session to receive testimony about alternatives to the IBRP proposal.

Figure 7. Design Option 5: Partial Interchange 3



More images below.

My credentials to address this topic.

While at 1000 Friends of Oregon I initiated the successful effort to replace the Westside Bypass (the proposed twin to I-205) with the Land Use Transportation Air Quality Project.

I was elected to the Metro Council in 2004 and re-elected in 2008, from District 6, which is the southern half of Portland. During that time the Council considered the Columbia River Crossing (CRC) proposal for a \$3.6 billion widening of I-5 from North Portland to SR 500 in Vancouver. I consistently supported a smarter, cheaper, greener alternative to the massive widening of I-5 to 17 lanes on Hayden Island and the massive new bridges across the Columbia River. I was one of two votes against that alternative on the Metro Council in 2009. The so-called Interstate Bridge Replacement Program project has been described by the project staff as a “tweak” of that design.

Between 2016 and 2019 I directed a project on behalf of the California Governor’s Office of Policy and Planning to help regional planning agencies for Southern California, San Francisco Bay region and Sacramento to implement state laws to reduce driving (VMT.) This familiarized me with the more advanced current practices used to evaluate capacity increase projects in California.

The proposed project is massive, ugly, extremely costly, will increase greenhouse gases and is unfair to disadvantaged communities; cheaper, smarter, greener, more equitable alternative were never seriously considered.

The IBRP staff have failed to provide details showing the number of lanes or renderings of the project as seen from Marine Drive, Hayden Island or the Vancouver waterfront. However, current information about the scale is:

Columbia River Bridges: Two side-by-side spans of 82’ in width; enough room for 6 lanes and a 10’ shoulder on each bridge; 12 lanes total capacity. You will be told the bridges are only 3 or 4 lanes.
By way of comparison, the Marquam Bridge deck widths are 57’ and were originally meant to handle three lanes but were re-stripped to handle four lanes on each deck.

Height over the river is 100’, but the IBRP staff report that it may need to be higher.

Hayden Island Crossing: The predecessor project, the Columbia River Crossing, on which this project is based, proposed 17 lanes including ramps and merge lanes across Hayden Island as shown in their rendering for that project. The IBRP has provided the image below but widths and lanes and height are not shown.

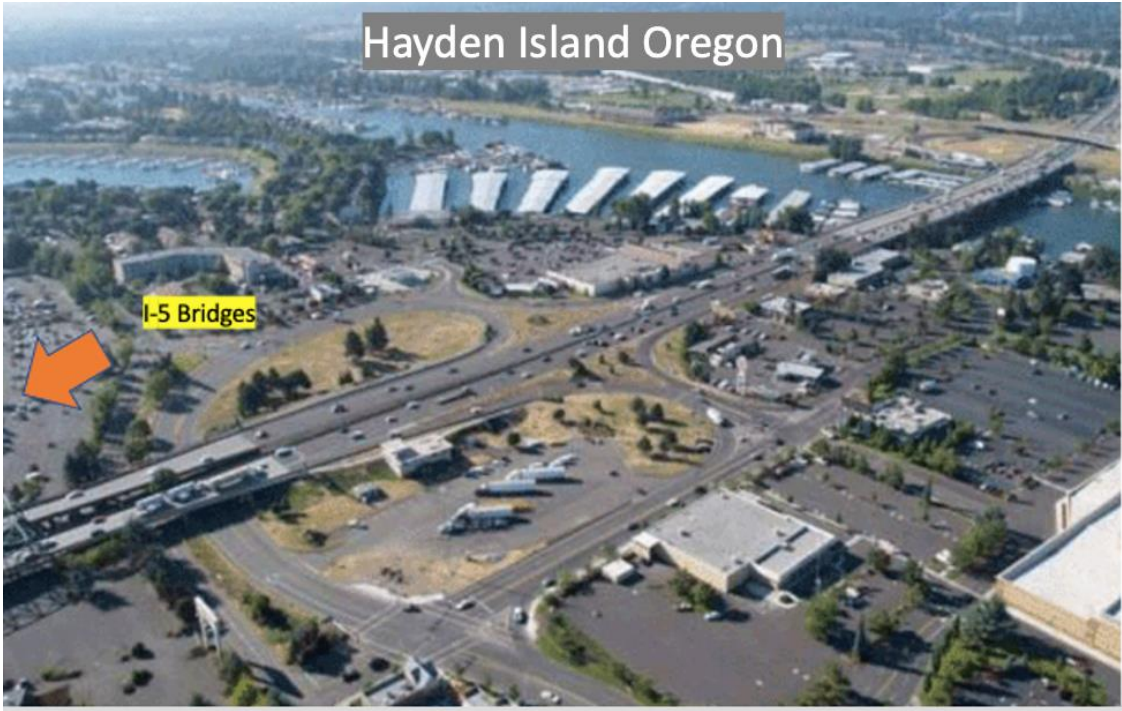
Marine Drive Interchange: Massive, as shown in the rendering. Note that there is already a separate bridge over the North Portland Harbor proposed and funded, shown in the rendering,

Estimated cost: \$3.2 to \$4.8 billion, \$1 billion each for Oregon and Washington, plus Federal money and tolls of several dollars per trip, based on CRC tolling analysis. Between two-third and three-fourths of the projects costs are for the interchanges and widening the freeway, with between one third and one fourth needed to replace the bridges.

Figure 7. Design Option 5: Partial Interchange 3



These images are looking southeast over Hayden Island today and then with the rendering prepared for the Columbia River Crossing project, on which the IBRP is based.



This is an image I created by blending an IBRP project rendering with a GoogleEarth image to show the scale of the project in downtown Vancouver:



The building on the riverbank adjacent to the left (west) side of the new bridges is the old Red Lion Hotel.

The Vancouver Waterfront is undergoing a rapid redevelopment both downstream and upstream from the existing bridges. As you can see in the image above, the proposed IBRP will reach the north bank of the Columbia downstream of the existing bridges, right along the property line for the old Red Lion Hotel which has just been demolished to make room for the Port of Vancouver's Pier 1 Marketplace redevelopment.

There are no renderings showing the impact of these two 82' wide spans on the Pier 1 Market, so I used Photoshop to create an image showing their impact on the project. For reference, imagine a lower Marquam Bridge on the west bank of the Willamette (say 80 feet above the shoreline instead of 130') but with more than triple the width of the deck ($57' * 3 = 171$ is slightly narrower than $2 * 82' = 164$ plus gap.)

This is only an impression - professional rendering using actual specifications is obviously needed.

Vancouver Pier 1 Market Place without and with the IBRP freeway bridges:



Here is what David Bragdon, the former Metro Council President who was in office when this project was approved as the Columbia River Crossing, has to say about the IBRP:

“I was an up-close witness to ODOT/WSDOT management’s bad faith for several years. Leadership at ODOT frequently told me things that were not true, bluffed about things they did not know, made all sorts of misleading claims, and routinely broke promises. They continually substituted PR and lobbying gambits in place of sound engineering, planning and financial acumen, treating absolutely everything as merely a challenge of spin rather than matters of dollars or physical reality”

“Unfortunately, I understand that’s exactly what’s going on with the rebranded CRC: the same agencies, and even some of the same personalities who failed so spectacularly less than a decade ago – wasting nearly \$200 million and building absolutely nothing – have inexplicably been rewarded for their failure by being given license to try the very same task, using the very same techniques of bamboozlement. It’s the definition of insanity.”

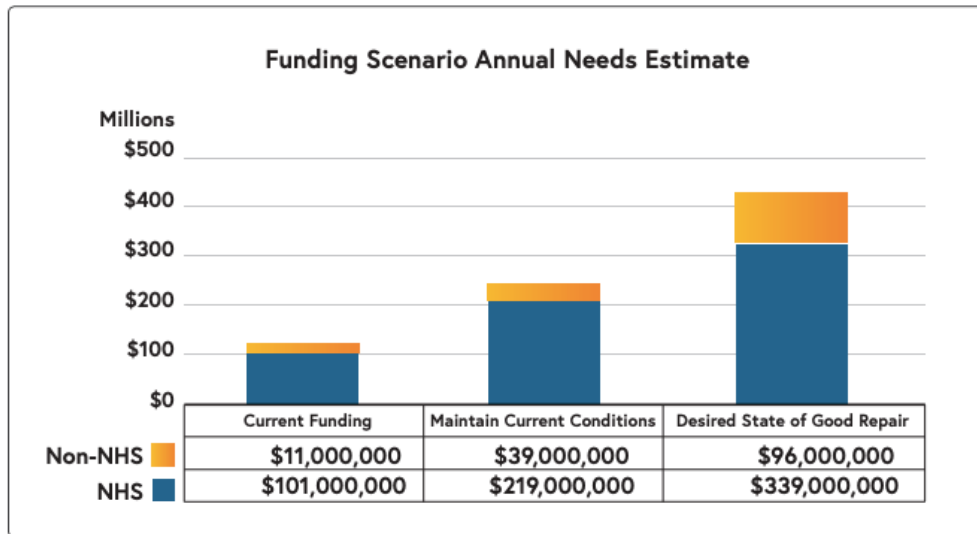
“I ask the community members and elected leaders of the Portland-Vancouver area in 2021 to take it from me, who learned it the hard way 2007-10: do not fall for ODOT management’s chronic misrepresentations, or its outdated technical methods rooted in the 1950s. You are being misled in the short-term, and your constituents’ descendants will be stuck with a terrible project and debt for decades.”

You can read his full commentary here: City Observatory *Just say no: How to deal with highway widening zealots* By David Bragdon May 12, 2022 <https://cityobservatory.org/hard-earned-lessons-dont-repeat-the-mistakes-of-the-failed-crc/>

This needlessly expensive project (\$3.2 to \$4.8 billion) will deprive many more useful projects in Portland and the region of funding, even without cost overruns.

Cheaper, smarter, greener and more equitable alternatives were never given serious consideration. For example, the CRC commissioned a study of the cost of retrofitting the existing bridges to meet Phase II earthquake standards – a cost they estimated as being \$246 million. That is less money than will be spent on the CRC and IBRP NEPA analysis and related studies (which is about \$330 million.)

The \$1 billion proposed to be spent on interchange rebuilding, new freeway ramps and adding lanes to I-5 for the just *in Oregon*, is about three times the amount of money needed to bring all the National Highway System bridges in the entire state of Oregon into a “state of good repair,” according to ODOT’s 2020 Bridge Condition Report:



The I-5 bridges are old and have old designs but they are not structurally deficient according to ODOT’s [2021 bridge inspection report – the structures are rated “Fair”](#) like 85% of Oregon bridges.

On the other hand, there are six bridges in Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington Counties that are structurally deficient and carry 190,000 trips per day versus, significantly more than the 130,000 to 140,000 trips per day for the I-5 Columbia River bridges. ([ARTBA 2022 Oregon bridge report.](#))

In Washington State there are three bridges on I-5 in Lewis and Clark County north of Vancouver that are rated structurally deficient and that carry about 127,000 trips per day – almost the same as the Columbia River Bridges. ([ARTBA 2022 Washington bridge report.](#))

What about cost overruns? Consider the Rose Quarter project.

The impact of overspending on this project in depriving other projects of needed funding will be worse if there are cost overruns.

Five years ago, the Rose Quarter project was estimated to cost \$450 million. In January of 2020 that estimate was increased to \$715 to \$795 million. The most recent cost estimate, including the cap, is \$1.2 to \$1.25 billion – almost triple the original estimate.

In April the OTC approved additional funding for the I-205 Abernethy Bridge project, an increase of almost one third over the initial estimate from \$375 million to \$495 million.

Portland expects some state funding for the Burnside Bridge replacement; will that be forthcoming if the IBRP costs escalate by \$1 billion?

Climate change.

The project staff continues to claim that by relieving congestion greenhouse gases will be reduced – something that researchers at PSU and elsewhere have discredited. More lanes means less congestion in the short term which leads to more driving (“induced travel.”)

[CalTrans, California’s transportation agency understands that more capacity induces more travel.](#) The California Environmental Quality Act requires CalTrans to [consider induced travel \(aka induced demand\) as part of the analysis of freeway capacity projects.](#)

And this says nothing about the massive amount of greenhouse gases that will be generated by the manufacture of concrete.

There is no equity analysis; only the promise of construction jobs and a political payoff.

The IBRP has declined to address the basic equity questions: What is the race, ethnicity, national origin and income of the primary *beneficiaries* of the project – commuters from the northern suburbs of Vancouver? They are overwhelmingly white and affluent? And what are the demographics of the people who will bear the burdens, including the diverse lower income communities along I-205 where traffic will be diverted by the tolls on I-5?

The IBRP project staff answer is that minority contractors will get some of the construction business and there be community benefit payments. If the Black residents of Albina had been hired to tear down their own commercial district and received a few checks, would that have justified demolishing the black commercial district when I-5 was built in the 1960s?

Recommended actions: The Design Commission may not have legal authority over the project, but it has the moral authority to advise the City Commission to reject this alternative.

The Design Commission does not have authority over projects in the public right of way, but you are being consulted anyway. But you do have the moral authority, even responsibility, to advise the City Commission to reject this proposal in favor of any one of the alternatives that is more equitable, sustainable and affordable.

Alternative action: Defer action until there are the renderings you need to exercise your judgment.

Schedule an agenda item at a later meeting to receive invited testimony on alternatives that are less massive, ugly and more sustainable and equitable.

Thank you for your time, consideration and public service.

Robert Liberty