



City of Portland Design Commission

BRIEFING MEMO

Date: December 8, 2022
To: Portland Design Commission
From: Staci Monroe Design Review
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Re: I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement Project
Design Commission Briefing on December 15, 2022

The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) will be presenting an overview of the I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement project at the upcoming December 15th hearing. The Commission was last briefed on this project back in March 2019. Since then, the project has been revised to incorporate developable highway covers among other changes.

The project is currently in an environmental study stage, which aims to fully understand the benefits and impacts of proposed changes. The Supplemental Environmental Assessment (SEA) was recently completed and published on November 15, 2022. This assessment builds on the original environmental assessment published back on February 15, 2019 and examines the environmental effects associated with the updated “Hybrid 3” highway cover design as further developed by ODOT. All of the SEA documents can be found at i5rosequarter.org. A virtual public hearing on the SEA will occur on December 14, 2022 from 5-7:30 PM. Information can be found at odotopenhouse.org/i5-rose-quarter-sea

The presentation will include an update on the revised project, SEA conclusions, design embellishments and next steps.

OVERVIEW

The I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement Project was created by ODOT and the City of Portland, with input from the local community. In the early 1960’s, during an era of highway building nationwide, the building of I-5, combined with other developments and urban renewal, disconnected the community and resulted in displacement – namely displacement of the African American community out of the central city. The well-connected street grid was disrupted, leaving limited options for crossing I-5 and the historically black Albina neighborhood physically separated from other neighborhoods. The original project scope has been revised since 2019 as a result of the [Independent Cover Assessment](#) and community engagement.

The goals of the project include reducing frequent crashes, improving travel reliability and improving community connections. The revised project includes the following improvements:

- Highway Covers that can be developed with buildings up to 6 stories.
- Local Street, Bicycle & Pedestrian Improvements
- New Hancock Connection over I-5
- I-5 Southbound Off-Ramp Relocation
- Ramp-to-Ramp (Auxiliary) Lanes
- Highway Shoulders

POTENTIAL DISCUSSION TOPICS:

As noted above, the project is in its early stages. However, a public urban design process will kick off in spring after the Environmental Assessment, with project design continuing through 2022. Construction would begin as early as 2023. Staff has provided several areas for the Commission to focus discussion to provide early conceptual feedback as follows:

Connections & Placemaking - This project has a big responsibility of knitting back together neighborhoods that were separated and adversely impacted by infrastructure and civic projects of the past. While past actions cannot be undone, this project is a monumental opportunity to re-establish those physical connections as well as acknowledge the cultures and identities of the past, present and future communities.

- The revised project includes developable highway covers that are intended to accommodate up to 6-story buildings and outdoor spaces that will support the existing and future Albina community. To fulfil the goals identified in the [Independent Cover Assessment](#) parcels need to be of adequate size and shape to produce contextual, urban development. City Staff are discussing the challenges and opportunities to create such parcels on the highway covers with ODOT. In addition, the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability (BPS) is about to initiate a Community Framework Agreement to further assess the type and governance of future development on the highway covers.
 - *Staff strongly encourages discussion about the size and shapes of the future parcels to ensure contextual urban development can be accommodated as envisioned in the Independent Cover Assessment.*
 - *The Commission should discuss when is the right time to engage and be briefed on the highway covers as concepts develop.*
- The project includes a series of infrastructure embellishments as well as future art opportunities and activating the undersides of the highway covers. ODOT has been meeting with the Historic Albina Advisory Board (HAAB) to develop some of the embellishments (signs, column collars, noise walls and crash barrier patterns, e.g.) that reflect the community and culture that occupied this once vibrant black neighborhood.
 - *Staff encourages the Commission to provide feedback on the embellishments and discuss other opportunities to incorporate cultural design and elements throughout the project.*

Sound walls - Two sound walls are proposed along the eastern edge of I-5 between the freeway and Lillis-Albina Park and Harriet Tubman School. The Commission's letter to ODOT after the 2019 briefing (attached), included concerns with solid tall sound walls and the impact on the visual continuity of the neighborhood on both sides of I-5. The project team was asked to consider transparent noise barriers or other alternative configurations that don't cut off views between the neighborhood. The sound walls are also located within two Scenic Corridors that support viewpoints within the park and near the school. Height limitations within these scenic corridors are 20'. The applicant is working with the HAAB and potentially with the Regional Arts and Cultural Council (RACC) on imagery/art applied to the walls to contribute to, and represent, the community so the walls are more than noise mitigation.

- *Staff encourages discussion about the scale, height and design of the sounds walls as well as any alternatives considered by the project team.*

Pedestrian/Bicycle Features – In the 2019 letter to ODOT, the Commission noted potential pedestrian safety concerns associated with wide pedestrian crossings, higher turning speeds and less pedestrian queuing, that may result from the proposed intersection turning radii. Designing the streets to accommodate multimodal mobility was supported. The Commission also indicated that the highway geometric design should not encroach into the surface streets and the street design should employ current best practices uses by PBOT.

- *Staff encourages a discussion about any changes to the project to address these concerns.*

NEXT STEPS

The comment period on the Supplemental Environmental Assessment ends on January 4, 2022 at 5pm. Depending on the extent of the discussion at the December 12th briefing, a summary of the Commission's feedback could be captured in a letter to ODOT written by the Commission or in a summary written by Staff and endorsed by the Commission.

Please contact me at (503) 865.6516 with any questions or concerns.

Enclosures:

- Letter from I5RQ Project Director, Megan Channell dated 12/1/22*
- I5RQ Hybrid 3 Fact Sheet*
- SEA Executive Summary*
- I5RQ Embellishments (excerpts from applicant presentation)*
- Design Commission Letter to ODOT & PBOT dated 4/1/2019*
- Independent Cover Assessment (digital only)*
- Applicant's presentation (digital only)*