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Comment on Freight Priorities

JPACT and the Metro Council have solicited comments to help develop a list of the region's highest priority projects to submit to the Oregon Freight Advisory Committee. On behalf of the Columbia River Towboat Association, we recommend that Metro put at the top of its list the Vancouver rail bridge modification project. This is a project to replace the existing "swing span" with a wider "lift span" and place it closer to the middle of the river. We urge Metro to recommend that the state share in funding this important project.

1. *The project removes identified barriers to the safe, reliable and efficient movement of goods:*
 - a) Priority is justified for critical safety as well as important freight efficiency reasons. The current configuration is a hazard to navigation. The tug & barge industry made this abundantly clear to the Coast Guard at its "Truman-Hobbs" hearing last year. The swing span was built in 1908 and is much too narrow for today's barge freight, and because of its close proximity to the I-5 crossing, the navigational difficulty is compounded. The distance between the bridges is barely adequate to allow the difficult maneuvers required to safely negotiate the bridge openings. Although the rail bridge opening is reasonably well lined up with the I-5 lifts (both are near the Washington shore), captains do not call for these lifts when they can be avoided, nor are they allowed to use them during the peak traffic periods of morning and evening "rush hour" (6:30-9 AM and 2:30-6PM). So they usually navigate under the I-5 bridges' higher spans toward the middle of the river, which require tows to make a difficult "S" turn to line up with the narrow rail bridge opening. This maneuver becomes more dangerous as river levels rise and currents increase. When the river reaches 6 feet at the Vancouver gauge, the maneuver (through the high span) becomes too dangerous, and captains use the I-5 lifts. In years of high run-off, the river can remain above 6 feet for 6 or 7 months at a time.
 - b) The dangers to tug & barge tows from a miscalculated maneuver are obvious and immediate, with the possibilities for loss of life and property a constant consideration for towboat captains. With increasing I-5 traffic, there has been increased pressure on captains to avoid using the lifts, and in 1999 the Coast Guard extended the length of rush-hour closures of the lifts. Thus the danger of a miscalculation has steadily increased. If a

tow were to hit and disable the rail bridge (the closest alternative is east of The Dalles, at Wishram), the cost to the regional economy could be enormous. We are very much concerned that if the BNSF bridge is not modified, a major incident here will inevitably be part of our future.

- c) This project would not only remove a hazard to navigation, but it would also remove an obstacle to the efficient movement of freight and surface traffic on the I-5 crossing. A lift opening on the BNSF rail bridge placed more toward the middle of the river would allow marine traffic to nearly always avoid using the I-5 lifts. WSDOT calculated that the current average annual cost of lifts in I-5 traffic delay is about \$0.8 million and will steadily increase to a projected cost of \$12 million by 2021. Currently a lift causes about 20 minutes in mid-day traffic delay, but by 2021 the mid-day delay could exceed 90 minutes. We anticipate about 275 lifts in 2004 (the current average). Clearly there will be more in the future.
- d) The I-5 lifts are truly an anachronism on the interstate highway system. Nowhere else in the country do we have an interstate highway that is closed down for such lifts. We have had three years of low water in the Columbia, so we have not had to use the lifts. However, that is changing. This year's snow pack looks to be back up to near or in some places above normal. That means we will again have lifts.

2. *The project supports public and private investment that creates or sustains jobs:*

- a) Although doing the project itself will naturally have some short-term benefits to the local economy, the real benefits come from increased transportation efficiency and the removal of a hazard to navigation. Both have significant beneficial effects to jobs in the region.
- b) The U.S. Commerce Department is forecasting a doubling of international trade by 2020. The increase will have significant impacts on our region, and economic benefits depend greatly on whether we can maintain an efficient transportation system. Census research indicates a historically high population increase over this same period, particularly in this region. Surface transportation infrastructure is already stretched to the limit. The current level of planned infrastructure improvements cannot possibly mitigate the impact of a doubling of the number of trucks and trains. The state doesn't have the estimated \$8 billion in today's dollars necessary to arrest the degradation of our roads and bridges. At \$32 million per lane mile to construct new roads, certainly less expensive options are preferable.
- c) A partial solution could be to take advantage of the barging capacity surplus. Think of it as a truck and rail multiplier. Each fully loaded grain barge contains the equivalent of 35 rail cars or 116 truckloads of grain. A typical 4-barge tow carries the equivalent of 1.4 unit trains or a string of semi-trucks stretching over five miles long. Barging is the most cost efficient mode of transportation. In order to maintain a healthy export economy, we will need to ensure that we can maintain our transportation efficiency, and to do that, we need to modify the Vancouver rail bridge and remove the I-5 lift bottleneck.

- d) Key findings of the Truman-Hobbs Coast Guard study were:
- Highway traffic congestion on I-5 will spread into the mid-day period when there is currently no restriction on bridge lifts.
 - Commercial barge traffic and the number of commercial bridge lifts will continue to increase from an average of about 275 per year to about 400 per year in 2021.
 - Bridge lifts during mid-day periods will significantly increase congestion by forming traffic queues that take a longer time to dissipate. These longer periods of traffic delay combined with a higher percentage of truck traffic in the mid-day period result in higher estimates of travel delay costs. In today's dollars, the benefits are estimated to increase from about \$.8 million in 2002 to nearly \$12 million in 2021.
 - There are nearly \$85 million in cumulative benefits in today's (real) dollars for the 20 year period from 2002 to 2021. The present value of these benefits using the federally specified discount rate of 7 percent is nearly \$32 million.
 - Given the increasing cost of congestion from bridge lifts, doing nothing could result in future pressure on elected officials to further restrict highway bridge lifts. Further restriction would add additional backup of commercial barge navigation in increase the safety risk by further limiting barge operations in daylight hours.
- e) Although the Truman-Hobbs study recognized the need to modify the rail bridge for safety reasons, Coast Guard headquarters decided that under its current interpretation of Truman-Hobbs regulations, the economic benefits to I-5 traffic could not be counted as part of the cost/benefit analysis. Thus, headquarters did not approve the study's recommendation (also noting the absence of a major barge/bridge allision in the recent past and declining to consider the increasing risk factors). Clearly, the economic impact to the I-5 corridor is highly significant, and whether or not the Coast Guard should have considered this economic factor, it is surely one of the reasons Metro should be recommending the project to the Freight Advisory Committee. Transportation efficiency translates directly into jobs, especially in this region so dependent on exports.

3. *The project supports multi modal freight movements:*

- a) The towboat industry plays an important role in the safe, reliable and efficient movement of goods, and we urge Metro to recognize the importance of the Vancouver rail bridge project not only to continued safe and reliable barge transportation, but also to the efficiency of I-5 surface transportation. Over 40% of U.S. wheat exports move on the Columbia River system. I-5 is an important crossroad for north-south and east-west freight movement. The Vancouver rail bridge is critical to north-south and east-west freight shipments and to high-speed passenger rail interests of the states of Oregon and Washington. Both crossings are key facilities connecting the Interstate system and the freight rail system with deep-water shipping and upriver barging, and this multi-modal intersection is the most significant freight center along I-5 between California and Washington.
- b) The benefits of the project are certainly multi-modal. The towboat industry benefits both from the elimination of a hazard to navigation, but also from the increased efficiency of

eliminating a bottleneck. If the project is constructed, towboat captains will no longer have to wait for lifts at I-5. There will be no restrictions at I-5, for the wide or high spans can be used at all times of the day. The morning and afternoon lift restrictions will no longer cause delays in barge traffic, no matter the river level.

- c) Certainly I-5 freight and other surface traffic will also benefit substantially from the absence of lifts, as pointed out above, but also there will be some benefit to rail traffic from the replacement of the current “swing” opening with a lift. We believe that a modern lift span can be operated with greater efficiency than the older swing-type opening, demanding less time for a tow than is currently needed. This means, of course, that the rail bridge would also be able to accommodate rail traffic more quickly. In addition, because tug captains now must arrange for lifts at both the I-5 and rail bridges, and both must be in the open position before the captain can begin the passage, the total time required for a rail bridge opening would likely be less in the future when I-5 lifts are not involved.

4. The project can be constructed beginning in 2006:

Once the region formally supports this project as a high priority freight transportation project, we expect that our Congressional delegations (both Oregon’s and Washington’s) will seek authorizing approvals and appropriate funding earmarks. Although the project will require specific authorizing legislation because of its continuing Truman-Hobbs characteristics, such legislation will likely be speedily crafted, since it has been done before, and the feasibility has been recognized by both the Coast Guard and Congress. As under any Truman-Hobbs procedure, this project would be a “turn-key” Coast Guard operation, with the agency supervising the project, from the environmental impact statement work to contracting the engineering and construction work. Funding may indeed be largely a federal matter, but because so much of the benefit is to I-5 freight mobility, there may well be a local (Oregon & Washington) component to the funding package.

We believe that the project could very well be built in 2006 if it is authorized in 2004.