

CRC shutdown to begin as Oregon Legislature adjourns

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The Interstate 5 bridge spans the Columbia River between Oregon and Washington.

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The Columbia River Crossing is dead, and it just might be for good this time.

The Oregon Legislature adjourned Friday without any action on the proposed Interstate 5 Bridge replacement, prompting state leaders to say they'll close down the controversial megaproject this spring.

Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber had vowed to pull the plug on the CRC unless lawmakers recommitted money to the project this session. That didn't happen. The Oregon Department of Transportation announced Friday, minutes after the final gavel fell in Salem, that the \$2.9 billion CRC will "shut down completely" by May 31.

That's a process that began last summer when Washington pulled out of the project. A last-ditch effort brought the CRC back from the grave by last fall. But Kitzhaber spokeswoman Rachel Wray appeared to close the door on a revival this time around.

"No equivocation," Wray said. "It's over."

Further development of the project "will not occur," ODOT Director Matthew Garrett said in a released statement. The agency will issue stop-work orders to consultants by March 15, archive materials and move out of the Vancouver project office in the coming weeks, he said.

"We have the fiduciary responsibility to close out the project in a systematic, retrievable manner in order to adequately preserve a decade of research, environmental reviews, community involvement, and detailed engineering work for potential future use," Garrett said.

CRC staffers and supporters had quietly acknowledged the likelihood of the project's demise even before Friday. Current and former CRC workers have circulated an invitation to a "celebration of work" gathering at a downtown Vancouver restaurant next week. The email invites recipients to "join us to celebrate the work we have done together."

The CRC effectively became a one-state effort after the Washington Legislature authorized no money for the project last year. More than half the CRC's staff packed up and moved on as the operation began to close down, only to re-emerge later as a scaled-back version with Oregon at the helm.

Supporters had hoped to salvage a project that would still replace the I-5 Bridge, extend light rail to Vancouver and rebuild freeway interchanges, mostly in Oregon. But the plan faced financial and legal questions from the start, and eroding political support. What sailed through both chambers of the Oregon Legislature in 2013 never even came to a floor vote in 2014.

Kitzhaber had also called for "appropriate action" by Washington this month — likely in the form of an intergovernmental agreement without legislative approval — which was far from a sure thing, even if the Oregon Legislature did get on board.

Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek, one of the CRC's strongest backers, conceded defeat in a statement issued just before adjournment Friday. The Portland Democrat blamed Washington for the CRC's failure, and said her chamber was ready act.

"In the end, however, Washington again failed to step up. Even though a majority of Washington legislators signed a letter of support, action was required by Governor Jay Inslee to move forward," Kotek said. "Absent clear, public commitment from Governor Inslee and the necessary memoranda of understanding between our two states, an Oregon-led project will not be approved this year."

Inslee, for his part, said the Oregon-led CRC was not the first choice, but he was sorry to see Friday's outcome, according to an emailed statement. "At some point, Washington and Oregon will have to discuss possible steps forward to secure a modern, safe link between our states," the governor said.

The project's collapse also marks a major political defeat for Kitzhaber, who had pushed for the CRC even after declaring it finished last year.

The CRC's death, assuming it stays dead, puts an end to lightning rod of controversy that has embroiled Clark County for the better part of a decade. Many opponents particularly objected to light rail, and plans to toll I-5, thereby putting much of the financial burden on Southwest Washington commuters who cross the bridge each day.

But the CRC had friends in high places, and continued to lurch forward despite repeated setbacks. Even this week, federal funding recommendations continued to include the CRC. And a Federal Transit Administration report actually upgraded one of the project's ratings earlier this year.

Opponents will cheer the end of the plan they say would have been disastrous for the region and Vancouver. That includes Washington state Sen. Don Benton, who was one of the loudest voices against the project in Olympia last year.

"The misguided Columbia River Crossing plan Oregon lawmakers were asked to support is an expensive proposition that threatens Oregon's economy more than it solves legitimate transportation concerns." Benton, R-Vancouver, said in a released statement Friday. "It is costly, ineffective and detrimental to Oregon taxpayers and leaders in that state were wise to let it die once and for all."

What's next remains unclear. Many opponents of the CRC have long called for at least one additional crossing over the Columbia River. Clark County Commissioner David Madore has pushed for a third "East County Bridge" at 192nd Avenue, and pledged to make it happen within five years. Previous estimates have also suggested the existing I-5 Bridge could be seismically upgraded for a fraction of the CRC's total cost.

Ultimately, a CRC effort that saw multiple bridge designs, multiple delays and multiple project directors never turned a shovel. The CRC spent more than \$180 million in planning.



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