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## Road Rage: Could fury over freeways topple plans for a new Columbia River bridge? Or will Portland join the "freeway arms race"?

**TOPICS:** Air Pollution Columbia River Crossing Crc Environmental Justice Freeway I-5 Interstate 5 Portland

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PORTLAND'S FUTURE? More than a dozen lanes jam the countryside on Interstate 5 south of Seattle, a city that still has not been able to curb congestion after spending billions to expand I-5 several times.

This is part 2 of Cascadia Times' continuing series on the Columbia River Crossing and air pollution. Read the series [introduction](#), and articles on [induced traffic](#),

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Portland is known as a test tube for radical ideas. Its critics have warned that, one day, Portland could choke on its own unique vision of "sustainability," or one of its other new age instincts, which are giving us things like bike boulevards and green taxis. They urge Portland to act like other places that are more in step with the rest of America, such as Seattle, Salt Lake City or Boston. But are these cities really so smart?

Take a look at the sprawling metropolis to the north, where Interstate 5 rambles across the countryside to and from downtown Seattle — 10 or more lanes full of cars going in both directions on one road. Living in Seattle means being stuck in perpetual traffic. But after the state spent \$2 billion dollars just to maintain and expand I-5 in King and Pierce counties over the last 20 years, the Seattle area still hasn't managed to unlock the gridlock in its main north-south corridor. Seattle is not the only example of a US city that has tried, and failed, to build itself out of traffic problems.

Freeways in Seattle, Salt Lake and Boston keep expanding in response to growing populations. Utah added two lanes to I-15 near Salt Lake in 1998 to curb congestion. Now, 13 year later, it is adding another two more lanes, again for the purpose of curbing congestion on the same stretch of road. The combined price tag: about \$6 billion.

Boston recently spent \$22 billion for a congestion-abating project known as the Big Dig, which expanded the city's 6-lane Central Artery to 10 lanes and buried it underground. The Big Dig was the most expensive road project ever in US history, a victim of massive cost

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overruns, as freeway projects often are. If Portland tries to build its way out of its traffic snarls, it will join other cities in the unwinnable "freeway arms race" with cold-war sized costs and consequences.

There have been several attempts to study how building new roads impact traffic. One of the most recent, a study released in August 2010, "The Fundamental Law of Road Congestion," by University of Toronto economists, Gilles Duranton and Matthew A. Turner, assessed the relationship between road supply and traffic volumes in 228 metropolitan areas across the United States over a 20-year period.

They found that the very existence of a new lane of freeway triggers a psychological impulse to drive more. "Our results strongly support the hypothesis that roads cause traffic," they said. Building more roadways to accommodate traffic is a self-fulfilling prophecy: if we build it, the cars will come.

Duranton and Turner found that a 10 percent increase in freeway capacity correlated to a 10.3 percent increase in miles traveled on urban interstates. At best, new roadways have bought Americans only a temporary reprieve in their battle to decrease travel times during rush hour. In the long run, freeways fill up again, reverting to their old, congested selves after wasting a huge pot of taxpayer money. Moreover, road projects can cause a hike in toxic air pollution and a jump in emissions of greenhouse gases.

The bottom line is that "road capacity expansions are not appropriate policies with which to combat traffic congestion," the study's authors said.

Cities that invested heavily in road capacity expansion fared no better in easing congestion than cities that did not, according to a 15-year study of 70 metropolitan areas by the Texas Transportation Institute, part of Texas A & M University. Areas with the greatest growth in lane capacity spent some \$22 billion more on road construction than those with less growth in lane capacity,

yet ended up with slightly higher congestion costs as measured by commuters' time and money.

"Traffic congestion tends to maintain equilibrium," says Todd Litman, of the University of Victoria's Transport Policy Institute, which in December 2010 published a report titled, "Generated Traffic and Induced Travel."

"Congestion reaches a point at which it constrains further growth in peak-period trips," the report says. "If road capacity increases, the number of peak-period trips also increases until congestion gain limits further traffic growth. The additional travel is called 'generated traffic.'"

These findings run contrary to the common wisdom that bigger roadways will move cars, freight and the economy at a faster clip. But they confirm that Portland has been on the right road for several decades by subsidizing other transportation options, like bikes, sidewalks, trails, trams, buses and light rail. The city's critics, however, see spending public money on these modes as an affront to the taxpayer — and make the absurd argument that users of these other modes should pay the full cost of alternatives to the car. Portlanders note that society already subsidizes cars. Instead, it should encourage people not to drive and subsidize its alternatives, in part because they mitigate the significant damage being done by automobiles and freeways to air quality and community life.

Indeed, bike paths and mass transit have become woven into the fabric of life in Portland, a place where freeways go to die. In Portlandia — the state of mind, not the TV show — the freeway is still seen through the lens of the 1970s as a symbol of all that is wrong with our automobile-dependent culture.

Portland has long been a visionary in the urban planning movement that values diversity, density and dynamism over bulldozers and slabs of concrete. You can still see the bones of the unbuilt Mt. Hood Freeway that would have demolished close-knit neighborhoods in the southeast part of town between Division and Powell.

In the 1970s, not long after New York was able to preserve Little Italy, Chinatown, and SoHo from the Lower Manhattan Expressway, Portland scuttled the Mt. Hood Freeway and a proposed network of 14 freeways, along with Southwest Harbor Drive, a downtown freeway which was ripped out for a park.

These examples of urban planning, which produced vibrant neighborhoods in Southeast Portland and the Governor Tom McCall Waterfront Park in downtown Portland, have likely attracted more people – by automobile—to Portland than highway expansion ever would have. These choices have made Portland the attractive and lovable city that it is today, and are still celebrated as a lasting victory of people and communities over the car. Portland opted to spend some of its freeway money on light rail.

But is Portland about to lose its way?

Mayor Sam Adams and other city leaders now support a \$3.9 billion plan to replace the outmoded, undersized and, some say, unsafe Interstate 5 bridge over the Columbia River, with a 10-lane megabridge, and expand the adjoining 5 miles of freeway by 22.7 percent. Interest on construction bonds could push the price tag to \$10 billion. The controversy is bringing Portland's freeway critics out of the woodwork. Skeptical Portlanders are bracing for an epic street fight. "Livability!" is the rallying cry.

Their concern is that the bridge could open Portland to more cars, worsen the city's current serious air pollution problem, peel the scab off an old wound, and erase an important part of what makes Portland weird. If replacing the existing configuration of twin Columbia River drawbridges is not done with Portland's peculiar urban ecology in mind, it could be a victory for the automobile and all of its excesses, as well as a reversal of anti-freeway sensibilities that go back 40 years.

The fact that the Columbia River Crossing (CRC) calls for an expansion of a light rail line over the river and bike

and pedestrian paths does little to appease skeptics.

“There is no doubt that we need to address the congestion on the I-5 system, and the ultimate solution probably involves one or more new river crossings, says Chris Girard, President and CEO of Plaid Pantries, a chain of local convenience stores.

“There is a very real danger that we will create an irreversible multi-generational financial disaster. The current proposal is a ‘debt-bomb’ that blows up well after all the consultants, planners, and engineers have moved on to their next projects.”

A final decision to fund the Columbia River bridge is at hand, and the outcome could go either way. Opponents, which include the Coalition for a Livable Future, 1000 Friends of Oregon, the Bicycle Transportation Alliance, as well as other environmental groups in Oregon. They are focused on fighting funding – there is no funding anywhere for construction yet – and talk about filing a legal challenge under the federal National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and the Endangered Species Act (out of concern for imperiled salmon that swim in the river below).

It’s interesting that for as much bile as these Portlanders heap upon the concept of freeways, many citizens of the smaller burgh on the north side of the Columbia – Vancouver – take the opposite point of view. Support for expanding the freeway and general ambivalence toward light rail is part of what makes Vancouver normal.

Proponents, which include the Portland Business Alliance, truckers, labor unions, the ports and many small businesses, note that it has already been approved by the governors and the transportation commissions of each state, by local cities and regional bodies like Metro and Tri-Met.

These proponents make the familiar claim that the CRC will ease congestion, but they also sugarcoat their plan by employing the same buzzwords that opponents use, like

mass transit and bike paths.

Gail Achterman, the head of the Oregon Transportation Commission, told the Portland City Council that an iconic Columbia River Crossing would be "the greenest bridge that's ever been constructed."

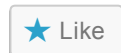
If you believe that, we've got a \$10 billion bridge to sell you. □

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ON "ROAD RAGE: COULD FURY OVER FREEWAYS TOPPLE PLANS FOR A NEW COLUMBIA RIVER BRIDGE? OR WILL PORTLAND JOIN THE "FREEWAY ARMS RACE"?"

**paul.koberstein | March 31, 2011 at 9:04 pm |**



See part 4 and make sure you check out the maps of Portland's air toxics.

**Matt | March 31, 2011 at 7:55 pm |**

Does Portland have bad air pollution?

I was unaware.

Comments are closed.