

CASCADIA TIMES

INVESTIGATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISM FROM THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST SINCE 1995

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The Media's Role. Did The Oregonian use misinformation to sell an expensive, unneeded bridge to an unwary public?

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POSTED BY: PAUL.KOBERSTEIN APRIL 2, 2011



The \$880 million Hayden Island/Marine Drive interchange is 17 lanes at its widest point, not counting a lane for light rail.

This is part 9 of Cascadia Times' continuing series on the Columbia River Crossing and air pollution. Read the

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series **introduction**, and articles on **induced traffic, lagging traffic counts, the cancer in Portland's air, an environmental injustice, ESCO and industrial air pollution, global warming and the CRC, a look to the future, and the media's role.**

You can download **maps of Portland's toxic air**

Commentary by Ronald A. Buel

The Oregonian, as many of us have known it over a lifetime of daily reading, has been a critically important part of the Portland region's life.

There was a time, not so very long ago, when a story about someone you knew in your hometown's metropolitan daily would literally be read by everyone you knew. Portland was then a small town grown large. If you read our daily newspaper, you felt connected to the place you lived, its democracy and its public life.

As a result of the paper's large, powerful, civically-engaged audience, The Oregonian's editorial page has wielded an outsized influence in Portland and Oregon's public affairs, particularly as it has been led over the last 30 years by civic-minded, thoughtful moderates such as Robert Landauer and now Bob Caldwell.

Despite the decline in its paid daily circulation, and the five-year drop of 50% in its revenues, it is within the positive context of this true leadership that The Oregonian's remarkable campaign in support of the Columbia River Crossing must be viewed.

It is safe to say that the Columbia River Crossing project would likely be non-existent if it were not for the more than two-dozen editorials written since June 2008 that have coaxed and cajoled the project forward. Without the certain knowledge that when you are running for the Portland City Council or Metro Council you need The Oregonian's endorsement to get elected, political support for the project in these local governments would have evaporated in the face of opposition from every one of the

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state's major environmental and land-use groups. And this evaporation would likely have occurred despite the big push the project has received from truckers, the building trades, the Port of Portland, and other business and labor interests. The Oregonian's enthusiasm for the CRC has been critical to its very being.

Following the process of local approval and planning for this project, one wonders what happened at The Oregonian editorial board to infuse it with this sense of conviction, why it decided to be such a champion, such a booster, for this particular project.

This wonderment is increased exponentially by the fact that The Oregonian's editorials do not fit within the paper's usual pattern of critical thinking about ambitious, expensive public undertakings, or within the logic of any of its previous major editorial campaigns. The paper's war on meth or its editorial crusade against Ballot Measure 9, the Oregon Citizen Alliance's attack on gay rights in the state's education system, come to mind as having well-reasoned and carefully crafted positions in which it was difficult to poke holes.

The most obvious oversight of this continuing set of editorials on the Columbia River Crossing is that they totally ignore higher fuel prices and the nation-wide decline in driving that has occurred during the last five years. Economists believe that prices affect action, but there has been no mention in any of the paper's many editorials that the CRC built its projections of future driving across the I-5 bridges on 1994 numbers, when gasoline was priced at less than \$1.35 a gallon, about one-third of today's price. The Oregonian assumption has been that the traffic growth projected in the CRC "needs" statement — growth that has not yet materialized six years later — will return to "normal" after the current recession ends, as if gas prices didn't matter at all, or as if we could somehow magically transform all of the region's fleet of big, gas-guzzling SUVs, pick-ups and vans into electric and hybrid passenger cars. As this is written, the cost of a barrel of oil has recently exceeded \$100 and the

price at a local pump is averaging \$3.47 a gallon for regular. The price of oil looks to be on an upward trend, as instability escalates in Middle East oil countries.

The paper's editorials have steadfastly defended the feasibility of the CRC's finance plan — one-third from tolls, one-third from Oregon and Washington state taxes, and one-third from the federal government. If only our politicians would "lead" and "be bold" we could finance this project, the paper repeatedly declaims. But with a current \$3.8 billion price tag at the time of this writing, and two full years after the local governments approved the 10-or-12-lane bridge as the Locally Preferred Alternative, there is still NO federal or state money committed to the project for construction. The \$119 million spent so far on planning, promoting and designing the project has come from "discretionary" Oregon and Washington transportation commission budgets — without ANY legislative authorization.

The plans for tolling the bridge rest on particularly shaky financial ground, but so far this information has received NO scrutiny from either the news or editorial pages of The Oregonian, as the paper's campaigns for the CRC have blinded it to any difficulty. To get the money needed up front to begin construction, the state must sell revenue bonds based on future toll revenues. To keep tolls low at first in order to appease the 165,000 Clark County daily commuters, who are not happy about paying tolls every day, the CRC plans to back-load the toll bond financing over 30 years. This back-loading will cost an additional \$1.2 billion in interest, and bring total interest costs on the toll revenue bonds to \$2.7 billion over 30 years. Wall Street bond buyers will require that the two states guarantee repayment of the toll bonds, including the interest, from future transportation budgets of the two states. Bond buyers will insist on this guarantee because of the decline of driving and commuting from distant suburbs, the result of those nasty gas prices. Also, because Oregon and Washington transportation leaders say the nearby alternative to the CRC when built, the Glenn Jackson bridge in East County on I-205, cannot be

tolled under law. Will there be enough CRC users, when toll prices are raised, to pay back the bond buyers?

That's what the bond buyers would worry about. The Oregonian insists that the CRC is a "project of national significance" that should get funding that is not competitive with other transportation projects.

In reality, local transportation projects like the yet-unfunded replacement of the Sellwood Bridge, which has wide and deep community consensus, have already fallen prey to the CRC. ODOT says it can only give \$30 million to the Sellwood Bridge out of \$300 million needed. This \$30 million is the exact amount of money ODOT has spent on planning, promoting and designing the CRC in the current biennium. This kind of logical leap that The Oregonian is apparently unwilling to make will, nevertheless, continue to be made by state legislators with their long lists of desired transportation pork.

Note to The Oregonian: If you can't finance the \$3.8 billion CRC, it isn't going to happen.

It may be unfair to write about these two-dozen Oregonian editorials since June 2008 without at least one quote. I have chosen a quote that I believe is fundamental to the phony sales job, and to the key misrepresentations that, unfortunately, are central to selling this project to local and state governments, taxpayers and voters. This quote is from the 2008 editorial, which appeared during City of Portland hearings on choosing the then-12-lane CRC as the Locally Preferred Alternative. This editorial praised City Commissioner Randy Leonard for insisting the CRC recommendation be based on "facts, rather than on some sort of Portlanesque, greener-than-thou, 'we hate cars' posturing," the editorial said. Here is the important quote:

"Awkwardly for bridge opponents, traffic modeling shows a 12-lane bridge would have substantial benefits for our region. It would result in fewer accidents, less congestion, better air quality and even fewer greenhouse gas

emissions — 9.5 percent fewer emissions, in all, than the “no build” option.”

Incredible as it may seem, The Oregonian’s facts are, indeed, drawn directly from the CRC’s Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) and from its traffic modeling. These “facts” were trumpeted in all of the local hearings by CRC lobbyist and spokesperson David Parisi (paid \$1.4 million) and they were used by CRC lobbyist Tom Markgraf (paid \$987,000) to convince business, labor and local neighborhoods to sign on.

Amazingly, the DEIS claims that, by building a 10-or-12-lane bridge, and spending \$1.56 billion on six interchanges, traffic will be free-flowing in the bridge impact zone. By thus removing the bottleneck in the bridge area, net congestion will be reduced for the region. When you reduce congestion, the DEIS says, the cars will be going faster and thus will emit less air pollution, and less carbon dioxide than if those cars were stopping and starting in the congestion of future years. Despite all the added lanes and capacity, the traffic modeling of the CRC amazingly projects, and this is crucial to the needed comparison, that the No-Build Option will have more trips in the target future modeling year than will a big, new bridge. This is partly because tolls and light rail will reduce bridge travel in the CRC scenario.

The problem with these “facts,” of course, is that they are not factual.

In the first place, when you remove a bottleneck in a closed system, such as our local freeway system, the bottleneck simply moves to another location downstream, a basic law of scientific queuing theory. Mayor Sam Adams commissioned a study of the CRC traffic modeling from the national engineering firm, URS. This study demonstrates that in the target modeling year, a 10-lane CRC will generate a southbound bottleneck less than two miles south of the bridge where I-5 narrows from five lanes to three. Every workday morning, all of those Clark County commuters will come to a dead stop and back up onto the bridge.

If you simply move the bottleneck less than two miles down the road, there is no reduction in congestion. If there is no reduction in congestion, then there will be no reduction in air pollution and carbon with a big new bridge. Cars will not speed up unless you build the additional capacity throughout the whole freeway corridor, which is going to cost substantially more than \$3.8 billion.

Moreover, we have already discussed the facts that the key CRC projections for the No-Build scenario are highly over-stated. They assume low and stable gas prices when today's gas prices are much higher (and rising). Traffic projections don't reflect modern reality. This leads to overstated levels of congestion, air pollution and carbon for the No-Build. And that's true even if people don't make logical decisions in the future, such as their choice of where to live and where to drive to avoid the congested I-5 peak commute hours, which, of course, they are free to make, just as truckers do today.

These "facts" The Oregonian parrots from the CRC DEIS are not true. They are part of a sales job that The Oregonian has chosen to support in the interest of its advertisers who want the help for their trucks, and other special interests fighting for a big construction project that will give them jobs and business revenue. The public interest has been totally lost in this sales job.

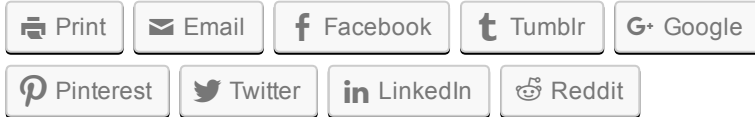
Ronald A. Buel was the founding editor and publisher of Willamette Week, was director of business and strategic planning for Nike, and was a bureau chief and staff reporter for the Wall Street Journal. He has long been involved in transportation issues, advocating for a better bridge over the Columbia recently, organizing against the defunct Mt. Hood Freeway 40 years ago, and serving as a board member of Tri-Met. He has written extensively on transportation, for national publications, and in a book on the subject published by Prentice-Hall.

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ON "THE MEDIA'S ROLE. DID THE OREGONIAN USE MISINFORMATION TO SELL AN EXPENSIVE, UNNEEDED BRIDGE TO AN UNWARY PUBLIC?"

Oregon Idler | September 4, 2012 at 12:50 am |

I love that bridge even more. It will serve all people evenly. That is a beautiful structure that Portland and Vancouver will enjoy. Thank You for that picture. When this is completed. No worries in my community as safety is the top concern. This will be built and we will all enjoy it.

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