

Moving Forward, Post-CRC

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Governor Kitzhaber has finally pulled the plug on the costly, risky Columbia River Crossing boondoggle. No games this time, according to spokeswoman Rachel Wray: "No equivocation... It's over."

In the end, courage from the Oregon Senate (most obviously President Peter Courtney, Senator Betsy Johnson, and the Republican caucus), a notable lack of support in Washington State, and the immense legal and financial problems with an Oregon go-it-alone approach doomed the misconceived mega-project, at least temporarily.

Having worked on the CRC since 2005, it's good to see it gone. The mega-project was mostly a bloated 1950s-era design, destined to cause huge problems while it half-fixed other problems. It would have jammed up I-205 in East Portland and access to the airport, while undermining our ability to fund the region's critical transportation needs.

The CRC's vision was impressively short-sighted and unaware of the changing world around it. It failed to take account of the changes coming in transportation (less driving), technology (big data and automated, self-driving cars), working (more telecommuting and varying work hours), and in state and federal finances (cratering gas tax income). It blissfully ignored the critical need to seriously address the climate crisis and ensure our transportation system improves safety, equity, and choice in the most efficient ways possible.

While the boondoggle is dead, many of the concerns that drove the mega-project remain. However, as project critics have often noted, these concerns can be dealt with at pennies on the dollar compared with the CRC, and actions can be phased, with later investments evaluated after first steps are taken.

For example, few would protest seismically upgrading the existing I-5 bridge spans, which we've invested heavily in and are built to last at least another half-century, perhaps almost indefinitely. If we do, it should be part of a larger seismic strengthening effort that prioritizes and fixes the most vulnerable and critical infrastructure, considering connections more vulnerable than the I-5 spans such as the Marquam Bridge and Highway 101.

Similarly, while the drawbridge in the current spans has significant benefits for river travel (and removing it had huge costs), it lifts on average about once a day. Most of the lifts are caused by a misalignment with the downstream BNSF rail bridge. Aligning the lift of the downstream bridge with the high point on the I-5 bridges could help freight and passenger rail, as well as avoiding all but a few dozen bridge lifts a year on I-5.

We can implement traffic demand management tools such as increased on-ramp metering and individualized marketing, making people aware of transportation choices. We could also look at a local bridge to Hayden Island, a light-rail, pedestrian and bike bridge across the Columbia, or a cantilevered bike-pedestrian path like that on the Steel Bridge.

We should also think about more systematic reforms. We need to correct how our Departments of Transportation model future traffic, as assumptions are a decade behind the times. We should consider a devolution of transportation funding, as the possible federal monies for the CRC were considered “free” and created a perverse incentive to build something we may not have valued enough to pay for ourselves.

We need to target our safety investments on our highest problems – something ODOT has already developed a system for, yet lacks the funding to fully implement. Sweden has a road death rate less than a third that of America, because they have put safety first. Hundreds of Oregonians and Washingtonian lives could be saved each year if we did the same.

It's long past time for tolling to become a significant tool in Oregon's traffic management and financing efforts. However, a regional approach makes more sense than a one-bridge one-off, and could provide funding to seismically secure the I-205 bridge. Influential Washington Senator Patty Murray could work to remove any federal restrictions on tolling for such purposes. Perhaps Oregon and Washington could be allowed to become incubators of innovation on transportation finance.

Finally, we must work harder to seriously consider opportunity costs when making huge investments. People are dying simply trying to cross roads like SE Powell, the City of Portland cannot find more than a million dollars a year for safe places for families to walk and bike, and Oregon's statewide road maintenance budget is woefully underfunded. Yes, these projects and priorities may not have high-paid lobbyists like the highway builders have. But they are the public's priorities. Safety, maintenance, and choice win in poll after poll over highway expansions.

The Columbia River Crossing, in its current iteration, is dead. But to avoid the next short-sighted mega-project plan, we must work hard to ensure our transportation investments are targeted, forward-looking, and truly serve the vision of a sustainable region we're proud to call home. Here's to the future, and moving forward.

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