

Columbia River Crossing: Tab approaches \$200 million after I-5 bridge project shuttered

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By Jeff Manning | The Oregonian/OregonLive

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crc.JPG

The clunky old I-5 bridges over the Columbia, with their drawbridge and traffic jams, will be with us for the foreseeable future after the CRC was killed off last month.

(The Associated Press)

It will go down in history as one of the largest public works project in Oregon history that never happened.

But the Columbia River Crossing was highly lucrative while it lasted for a handful of big engineering and consulting firms. The CRC paid \$199.4 million to 171 companies, consultants and others in the last 10 years, according to the latest numbers released to The Oregonian by the Oregon Department of Transportation.

Portland-based David Evans and Associates was the big winner with more than \$44.3 million in billings either paid or accrued. David Evans was the CRC's general engineering consultant and played a central role in hiring and paying the project's dozens of smaller contractors.

Parsons Brinkerhoff of Denver was paid more than \$23.9 million for bridge and roadway engineering. Auburn, Wash.-based Parametrix, the project's lead environmental review consultant, is receiving \$17 million.

Columbia River Crossing

Overall expenditures for the I-5 bridge replacement project processed as of March 31:

Total:

\$199,499,108

Oregon: Spent about

\$12.2 million

of state money and

\$90.4 million

of federal money.

Washington: Spent about

\$48 million

of state money and

\$46.1 million

of federal money.

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[See a list of all the expenditures](#)

Source: Oregon Department of Transportation

The CRC spent nearly \$10 million on public relations and political consulting firms, perhaps not surprising for a project that became controversial and highly politicized.

Most of that money -- more than \$8.6 million -- went to Seattle-based public relations firm [EnviroIssues](#). Another \$1.2 million went to Markgraf & Associates, a Portland political consulting firm led by Tom Markgraf, who led early public outreach efforts. More than \$500,000 went to McCaig & Associates, the firm led by Patricia McCaig, who served as Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber's eyes and ears inside the CRC.

Despite more than 10 years of work and the staunch support of Northwest political and business leaders, the I-5 bridge replacement and freeway expansion expired in March when the Oregon Legislature declined to reauthorize it.

Conservative Republican lawmakers from Clark County, who despised the CRC's light rail extension into Vancouver, convinced the Washington Senate to walk away from the CRC. That left Oregon to go it alone.

Oregon legislators shied from the financial risk of an Oregon-only plan. The state would have had to borrow more than \$1.3 billion to pay for the bridge and rely on revenue raised from tolling to repay the debt.

The new numbers show the CRC spent a good deal of money -- at least \$3 million -- on toll studies. It paid \$1.5 million to CDM Smith of Cambridge, Mass. for an investment-grade analysis of the toll plan, which turned out to be the project's death knell.

The analysis predicted tolling would generate \$80 million a year, sufficient to repay Oregon's hefty debt. But it made the project even less popular among Clark County residents, who would have paid about two-thirds of the tolls.

The analysis also predicted that more than 20,000 drivers a day would detour away from the I-5 crossing once it was tolled in favor of the untolled 205 bridge. That news rang alarm bells all over Clackamas County and the county commissioners quickly denounced any plan that would increase congestion on I-205.

So what happens now?

The roomfuls of data and analysis generated by the CRC will likely end up in the recycling pile. Some of the more technical materials -- such as the \$3 million worth of analysis of archaeologically sensitive areas -- could conceivably be repurposed in the event of another I-5 bridge plan. But much is probably too project-specific for reuse and the longer the data sits in storage, the less likely it will ever be used, said David Thompsons, ODOT spokesman.

Meanwhile, there is talk of new Columbia River bridge alternatives.

Clark County Commissioner Dave Madore is calling for a new crossing east of the I-205 bridge, apparently connecting Marine Drive to Highway 14 in Washington. The strident CRC critic says his bridge could be built for \$1 billion and be completed in five years.

Liz Pike and Ann Rivers, Clark County lawmakers instrumental in withholding Washington's support from the CRC, have called for the two states to begin talks on the next bridge plan.

Oregon's response so far has been tepid.

-- Jeff Manning