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Group offers detour from plan for new I-5 bridge

A private alliance says Washington and Oregon should consider other routes to avoid bottlenecks

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As teams from Washington and Oregon start to plan for a new \$1 billion Interstate 5 bridge, a private, nonprofit group is turning up the volume on its warning that the bridge is going in the wrong place.

The Economic Transportation Alliance, which is composed of concerned residents and which has no ties to government groups, says its plan wouldn't be cheaper, but it would eliminate bottlenecks on Interstate 5 by creating new routes that more efficiently move commuters and cargo. Its blueprint includes two long bridges, a shorter bridge and a new freeway from Vancouver's port area across west Hayden Island to Rivergate Industrial Area, then across the Willamette River to U.S. 30 north of the St. Johns Bridge.

Conversely, an I-5 proposal being prepared by officials from Oregon and Washington is in the wrong place, according to the alliance, because it does nothing to eliminate the bottleneck in Portland from Columbia Boulevard to the Marquam Bridge. That plan calls for 10 bridge lanes narrowing to six lanes at either end.

The bi-state team is following the directives of three consecutive task forces -- dating to 1998 -- on congestion and freight delays. The alliance, whose plan has drawn the support of several area politicians and business leaders, is using excerpts from the same reports to argue that a wider bridge in the same place solves nothing.

"Many of the earlier decisions were based on the expectation that the Interstate bridges were crumbling, in bad shape," said Sharon Nasset, a Portland resident who has been publicizing the alliance's highway route for several years. "And then the report came out saying the old bridges would last another 50 years, that they are structurally sound, but we are stuck with the incorrect assumptions" that the bridges are failing.

Austin Pratt, regional bridge permit supervisor for the U.S. Coast Guard in Seattle, said unresolved issues include limiting the height so the bridge is not a threat to planes using Pearson Field or Portland International Airport, deciding how much clearance is needed by boats, and lining up a boat channel so

He noted that one reason for all the studies was to eliminate the sole freeway lift span between Canada and Mexico. However, the bi-state team recently presented to regional transportation officials sketches of plans that included as many as four lift spans.

"I don't think the Federal Highway Administration will approve that," Pratt said. He said the lift spans can stay if the two old bridges remain.

The alliance proposal calls for preserving the I-5 bridge but adding a single-span, triple-deck bridge just west of Vancouver's Amtrak depot, where the Fort Vancouver Plywood mill once stood. Early drawings show a single arch with no in-stream piers for boaters to dodge, and no lift or turntable opening area.

The triple-level bridge would include six lanes for cars on the top deck and six lanes for trucks on the middle level. The bottom deck would include six rail tracks -- four for freight trains and Amtrak, and two available for light rail. The plan also would need a shorter bridge south from Hayden Island across the Oregon Slough, and a high, long bridge over the Willamette River.

One supporter of the alliance plan is Tom Mielke, Republican candidate for Clark County commissioner. Mielke, a former Washington legislator, said those blindly rushing ahead on an I-5 corridor plan are not using common sense.

"It seems like everyone is too anxious to spend the money," Mielke said. "Some of the problems with building another Interstate Bridge are obvious."

Nassett, who is in real estate sales in Portland's St. Johns neighborhood, lost some supporters when she backed away from creating a Westside Bypass through Washington County. And more recently, she's erased a double-decked freeway above the railroad in what BNSF Railway calls the Willamette Cut through St. Johns, saying the old plan did little to get rid of large trucks in St. Johns' residential neighborhoods.

The new version calls for trucks and cars -- but no trains -- crossing the Willamette River near Linnton. That vehicle traffic would use a new freeway paralleling the Old Portland Highway and Columbia Boulevard.

Another advocate for the industrial route is Portland businessman Paul Edgar, who says the official bi-state study team should be sidetracked before it runs through more than \$50 million in federal and state grants for environmental study -- of the wrong route.

While the official team is following directives set out in previous reports -- three through lanes in each direction, two local access lanes in each direction, and some provision for mass transit -- the alliance is using those directives to say wrong place, waste of money.

For example, Don Wagner, regional administrator for the Washington State Department of Transportation, told his state commission, "There physically is no room for additional lanes in the (I-5) corridor."

Wagner, who previously held a similar job for the Oregon Department of Transportation, said I-5 cannot be widened between Lombard Street and the Fremont Bridge.

Minutes of a Washington transportation meeting in 2004 cite Wagner as saying, "Enlarging the Columbia River Bridge will not add capacity to the I-5 corridor."

One controversial aspect of the alliance's plan is the northern link to I-5. It proposes putting trucks and cars in a deep trench along Mill Plain Boulevard and 15th Street. To build the trench, a 5-year-old stretch of concrete -- which cost \$36.5 million in 2000 and 2001 -- would be ripped out and overpasses built for surface traffic.

Wagner has speculated it could take 20 years to get the necessary permits and build a new I-5 span, but Nassett has been urging officials to use the work of previous studies. She thinks the alliance's version could be resolved in five years.

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