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Study: Columbia River Crossing worst chokepoint

Ten top traffic congestion spots in Portland area

By Jim Redden

A new independent study of the top 50 traffic chokepoints in Oregon confirms what most metropolitan residents already know – the worst one is the I-5 bridge between Portland and Vancouver, also known as the Columbia River Crossing.

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But the study also found that all of the top ten worst chokepoints are in the Portland area. They include three other interchanges on I-5, including where it meets I-205, where it meets OR 217, and where it meets both I-84 and I-405 near the Rose Quarter.

In fact, around one-third of all the worst traffic checkpoints in the state are in the Portland area.

"It should not be surprising that so many of the top chokepoints are in the Portland area, since that's such a center for commuting and freight traffic," says Frank Moretti, director of policy and research of TRIP, a Washington DC-based nonprofit organization sponsored by businesses involved in highway and transit improvements.

Moretti visited Portland on May 13 to release the report. His visit was sponsored by the Portland Business Alliance, a membership organization that represents many downtown area businesses. The PBA supports the current proposal to replace the I-5 Columbia River bridge with a new bridge that incudes a light rail line and improved access for pedestrians and bicyclists.

"The study underscores why the Columbia River Crossing [project] is such a top priority for small and large businesses," says David Knowles, the chair of the PBA's transportation committee. "Freight delays increase the cost of business to everyone."

The current CRC proposal is estimated to cost between $2.6 billion and $3.6 billion. In addition to the replacement bridge, the proposal called for rebuilding several freeway interchanges in a five-mile stretch of I-5 that includes it. In addition to the PBA, the proposal is supported by other business organization, along with many labor unions. It is opposed by environmentalists and some civic leaders, including Mayor Sam Adams, who believes it is too large and expensive.

TRIP releases studies about the worst chokepoints in several states every year. According to Moretti, the organization has not looked at Oregon for around 20 years.

"The state has grown a lot since then and the problems have gotten a lot worse," Moretti says. "They will only get worse is nothing it done to address them now."

Fixing all the chokepoints would cost billions of dollars. Funding commitments have only been made for some of them.

Moretti praised the 2009 Oregon Legislature for approving an ongoing transportation funding program that will raise millions for road and transit improvements in years to come. He urged Congress to take similar action to help fund transportation infrastructure improvement project.

Knowles agreed, saying that multi-modal transportation improvements are need for America to compete effectively in the global economy.

This is especially true in the Portland area, Knowles says, because of its dependence on freight traffic to and from the Port of Portland.

"Such projects are critical to the economy of the region," Knowles says.

The report and related materials are available at www.tripnet.org