

In Our View: Outside Opinions

Consultants from far away add value to discussions about new I-5 bridge

Informed, outside observers continue to tell people in the Vancouver-Portland area what we have known for many years: The need to replace the Interstate 5 Bridge is drastic, and action is long overdue.

That familiar message came from a few distant sources last week, and it reinforces the urgency of the Columbia River Crossing project. If only the multijurisdictional nature of this venture were not so extensive, ground might already have been broken, perhaps ribbons already cut. That, though, is dreaming. The crowded kitchen is what it is, and the CRC has no choice but to listen to all the cooks representing a vast array of governments. But the sources that chimed in recently offered a few reminders that are worth reviewing.

As Aaron Corvin reported in Friday's *Columbian*, visiting consultants told attendees at a Portland trade conference that lack of rail improvements will stifle economic growth in this area. Replacing the bridge is vital to expediting business for the ports of Vancouver and Portland, both of which depend heavily on rail traffic. "We'd like to see the new bridge project, to create fluidity," said Michael Pasha, general manager of port development for a California-based firm. Pasha added that the Port of Vancouver lost a car-importing contract to the Port of Grays Harbor three years ago because of infrastructure deficiencies here.

At the same conference, David Sanborn, a port consultant for a New York-based firm, said consumer confidence is stabilizing nationwide and manufacturing is "starting to bounce back for us." Still, "We've deferred a lot of what we've needed to do with infrastructure in almost all cases."

Those opinions from expert out-of-towners deserve the attention of stakeholders in the CRC project, especially the philosophical foot-draggers and obstructionists.

The good news in Vancouver is that our port is well into its \$137 million plan to complete the West Vancouver Freight Access project by 2017. But if that project is not accompanied by bridge improvements, local economic development goals will be thwarted.

Another bridge-related message last week came from TRIP, a nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C., and underwritten by the transportation industry. TRIP rated the I-5 bridge as the worst chokepoint in Oregon among 50 transportation bottlenecks in the nation. That surprises no one in this area, but what's worth pondering are other TRIP points: The four-mile, multi-interchange CRC corridor "is congested 4-6 hours per day and could be congested for as many as 15 hours per day by 2030." Also, "(the current) limited public transportation service across the Columbia River serves only about 3,500 riders each weekday and does not provide a convenient alternative to driving ... buses get bogged down in congestion with everyone else."

Too often, it seems to us, observers of the CRC project focus either too broadly (yes, I-5 is the major West Coast trade corridor from Mexico to Canada) or too narrowly (yes, it's a congested bridge — with a lift, no less — over a river.) The more appropriate focus is on the four-mile corridor. The biggest challenge facing project designers is expediting traffic onto and off of Interstate 5 within those four miles. Indeed, more than two-thirds of the traffic enters or leaves (or both) the freeway within those four miles.

Let's keep listening to out-of-towners. And let's keep urging the multiple layers of government on both sides of the river to better understand and support the local experts with the CRC.