

*Joint Transportation Committee*

## **Columbia River Crossing Oversight Subcommittee**

*December, 2012*

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In the 2012 State Transportation Budget, ESHB 2190, Section 204(7), the Legislature directed the Joint Transportation Committee to form a Columbia River Crossing Oversight Subcommittee to review project and financing information, and to coordinate with the Oregon legislative oversight committee.

The I-5/Columbia River Crossing (CRC) project addresses six critical problems: congestion, crashes, freight immobility, earthquake risk, limited transit options, and poor bike and pedestrian access and connectivity. The project is estimated to cost up to \$3.413 billion, funding for which is anticipated to come from tolls (up to \$1.3 billion), the federal government (\$1.3 billion), and Oregon and Washington (up to \$0.9 billion).

Subcommittee membership includes three State Representatives and four State Senators, two of whom represent the area served by the bridge; a citizen member from the area served by the bridge; and the Governor's appointee, the Secretary of Transportation.

The Subcommittee met four times in the summer and fall of 2012, in Vancouver. The meetings were open to the public. The Subcommittee also had a private meeting in Seattle in October, with the head of the Federal Transit Administration. The Subcommittee chair held a private meeting in October with the Commander of the U.S. Coast Guard's Thirteenth District in Seattle.

**The first meeting** was held at Vancouver City Hall on June 19, 2012. The day-long meeting included a project overview and description of the December, 2011 Record of Decision; discussion of the project cost and financing plan, and appropriations to-date from all sources; the U.S. Coast Guard permitting process; and project phasing opportunities. A three-hour bus tour showed the project location on both sides of the river, and included discussion with the Port of Vancouver and C-TRAN, the local transit agency responsible for proposed light rail operations across the bridge. Finally, members of the Oregon CRC Oversight Committee reported on their work over the past year.

Subcommittee members engaged project staff on several key issues, including concerns about bridge height and its impact on current river users; how the locally-preferred-alternative (LPA) was chosen; why the LPA includes light rail rather than bus-rapid-transit; and the requirements to secure an \$850 million federal New Starts grant to pay for the light rail project.

**The second meeting** was held at WSDOT's SW Region headquarters on August 20, 2012. Two members of the Oregon Oversight Committee joined the Subcommittee at the table. The agenda included discussion of work underway to refine the LPA; what might trigger an amendment to the Final Environmental Impact Statement and the implications of such an amendment; work underway with river users for whom a 95' bridge clearance would be a barrier; and the workplan for submitting a General Bridge Permit application to the U.S. Coast Guard by late 2012. C-TRAN also reported on their November, 2012 ballot measure, a request for approval of a 0.1% sales tax increase to fund light rail transit operations and maintenance.

The **meeting with Peter Rogoff, FTA Administrator** occurred October 1 in Seattle. Mr. Rogoff indicated strong FTA and FHWA support for the Columbia River Crossing project; that the \$850 million New Starts

grant is only for light rail (not bus-rapid-transit); a potential New Starts grant for bus-rapid-transit would be much less than \$850 million and would require a new application; and that a recent law Senator Patty Murray spearheaded through Congress provides a significant benefit to the project, allowing Oregon and Washington's equity contribution to the highway portion of the project to qualify as the required 50% match for the New Starts transit grant. In response to questions, Rogoff said TriMet is in good shape as far as being able to finance maintenance on existing facilities. And he said Congress has always funded approved "full funding grant agreements" (signed New Starts contracts), and he would expect nothing different in the future. He also said that should the C-TRAN sales tax vote fail in November, 2012, it won't slow the project down; the project remains in the FTA New Starts pipeline until one of the project sponsors says to pull it out of the pipeline.

Also on October 1, **Chair Armstrong met with Rear Admiral Keith Taylor, Commander, Thirteenth Coast Guard District**, members of the Admiral's staff, and CRC project personnel and JTC staff, concerning the General Bridge Permit. The Admiral said the Coast Guard has concerns about the proposed 95' clearance, and needs to understand current river users and the economic impact of that clearance on river users. WSDOT said project staff has done a lot of work since December, 2011 to understand the Coast Guard's information needs, and is working to address their concerns. When asked about the potential cost of mitigation perhaps leading to consideration of a movable lift span, WSDOT said this question will be addressed before the project submits the General Bridge Permit application. The Coast Guard said it is possible to limit bridge lifts to the middle of the night, a decision which would be made as part of a rule-making process. And Admiral Taylor said the Coast Guard is reconsidering a statement made in its September response to the project's *Work Plan for Submitting the Bridge Permit Application*, that it cannot accept a General Bridge Permit application until all mitigation discussions have been concluded. The USCG will develop a further response to this question.

A **third meeting** on October 9, 2012, addressed the project's finance plan, traffic and revenue work, the list of expenditures to be financed with the \$850 million New Starts grant, and potential federal TIFIA funding for the project. Discussion continued regarding the U.S. Coast Guard's General Bridge Permit. Project staff provided written answers to 44 questions asked by Subcommittee members and staff.

Thirty-four members of the public addressed the Subcommittee, presenting their viewpoints on the project. Some testimony indicated strong support for the project as currently designed, and called it the largest economic development project on the West Coast. Many speakers expressed support based on the jobs and apprenticeships it would create, especially for members of the Building Trades who have considerably higher unemployment rates in Clark County than the general public. Others expressed opposition to the project or various of its elements, including the light rail component, additional sales tax to finance light rail operations, and concern that it would force C-TRAN to inherit Tri-Met's cost structure and debt. Others questioned the cost to collect tolls; said the project needed independent financial advice; and objected to \$150 million in expenditures-to-date that have not yet built anything.

The **fourth meeting** on December 10, 2012, included a post-election update; addressed governance with members of the Washington and Oregon Transportation Commissions, whereby both states will issue debt and jointly set tolls; discussed the project's *Navigation Impact Report* recently delivered to the U.S. Coast Guard, and the General Bridge Permit application; reviewed debt-issuance considerations and lessons learned in financing transportation projects with the Oregon and Washington State Treasurers' offices; and a presentation on the project's phased master plan.

Discussions are underway with the Oregon Oversight Committee about a potential fifth meeting in early January in Olympia.

**Key dates in CRC Project Timeline:**

- September, 2011 Final EIS published
- December, 2011 Federal Record of Decision signed
- March, 2012 Governor signs ESSB 6445 defining CRC as an eligible toll facility, and authorizing the Washington State Transportation Commission to enter joint toll setting agreements with the Oregon Transportation Commission
- June–December, 2012 JTC’s Columbia River Crossing Oversight Subcommittee meets
- January, 2013 Project submits General Bridge Permit application to USCG
- 2013 legislative Oregon and Washington legislatures need to approve equity contributions to meet New Starts and TIFIA application deadlines
- Fall, 2013 Submit full funding grant agreement application to FTA
- Winter, 2013 Submit TIFIA application
- Late, 2013 Complete investment grade traffic and revenue analysis
- Early, 2014 Transportation Commissions set toll rates
- Late, 2014 Begin construction
- Mid, 2015 Begin pre-completion tolling

**Subcommittee members** include Rep. Mike Armstrong, Subcommittee Chair; Rep. Judy Clibborn, Rep. Jim Moeller, Sen. Mary Margaret Haugen, Sen. Curtis King, Sen. Tracey Eide, Sen. Ann Rivers, citizen representative Rhonda Boni-Burden, and Secretary of Transportation Paula Hammond.

Subcommittee materials are available at the following web address:  
<http://www.leg.wa.gov/JTC/Pages/CRCOversightSubcommittee.aspx>