

Regional council will study transit options across county

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BY DON HAMILTON

Clark County's mass transit picture grew a little more complicated Thursday as the Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council launched a countywide study of high-capacity transit.

The study gets under way as another project, the Columbia River Crossing, reaches bureaucratic maturity. Light rail and a system called bus rapid transit are both under consideration for inclusion in a new Interstate 5 bridge.

Clark County, in other words, could wind up with two different mass transit systems.

The two studies may share some similarities, but they are far from identical, said Dean Lookingbill, the council's transportation director. The bridge project looks only at the area around I-5; the new study will look at the whole county.

"We continue to see traffic delays and traffic congestion," Lookingbill said Thursday. "We believe this is a good time to take this up."

The new project will devise a countywide, high-capacity mass transit system. Clark County is part of the Portland metro area, which committed itself to light rail two decades ago. But that doesn't mean Clark County cannot devise a different system of its own. All systems, Lookingbill said, can be linked.

Columbia River Crossing officials said the addition of the new study would only increase the volume on Clark County's mass transit debate.

"They work in tandem to pique the public's interest," said Danielle Cogan, the group's public information officer. "We have two groups saying transportation is a real issue here. Since transit is so important and coming to the forefront in Clark County, it's a positive. These are issues we need to discuss. I don't see it as competition in any way, shape or form."

Oregon has a voice in the process, Lookingbill said. The Oregon Department of Transportation and Metro, the Portland-area regional government, are both represented on the RTC.

The Clark County study will look at a wide range of options, including heavy rail, like BART in and around San Francisco; light rail, like in Portland; monorail, like the Seattle World's Fair; commuter rail, like Puget Sound's Sounder and what's coming soon to Washington County, Ore.; and bus rapid transit, the name given bus systems with priority at traffic signals, dedicated lanes and other exclusive features.

Traditional bus service won't be part of the study. A high-capacity system, Lookingbill said, must help create options to keep residents off the already-crowded roads.

Update

Previously: The Columbia River Crossing plans a new Interstate 5 bridge with either light rail or bus rapid transit.

What's new: The Regional Transportation Council Thursday announced it will study a countywide high-capacity mass transit system.

What's next: Both the RTC and the Columbia River crossing will decide on a mass transit component in 2008, but they may be not be the same.

The study will cost about \$1.9 million, with \$1.5 million coming from a federal Transit Administration grant and the remainder from C-Tran, Clark County, the cities of Camas and Vancouver, and the ports of Vancouver, Camas-Washougal and Ridgefield. Planners expect to see the study completed in about 18 months in a process that will include plenty of input from the public.

The RTC board will make final decisions on the type of system that might eventually serve the county. It will be assisted by an eight-member steering committee with representatives from the Board of Clark County Commissioners, C-Tran, the Vancouver City Council, the Washington Department of Transportation, the Battle Ground City Council, the Washington Legislature and the Port of Vancouver.

Advising the steering committee, in turn, will be a task force of 12 to 15 people representing "a range of community interests." Members of the task force have not yet been named.

The cost of any high-capacity system won't be known until the RTC decides what type of system Clark County needs and where it will go.

The announcement comes as the Columbia River Crossing project has given the mass transit debate its first real footing in Clark County since 1995, when voters resoundingly defeated a connection with Portland light rail. Since then, the county has grown, congestion has worsened and Portland's light rail has reached north to the Expo Center, only a mile from downtown Vancouver.

Still untested, though, is whether these factors have changed Clark County attitudes about mass transit. Even so, the mass transit debate is now under way on two fronts and the two projects may find themselves competing not just for the confidence and good will of the public but for federal money as well.

The Columbia River Crossing project could cost more than \$2 billion and will rely heavily on federal money. The Regional Transportation Council also envisions federal support.

"Yes, it does complicate things a bit," said Jeff Hamm, C-Tran's new CEO, "but it's not fatal. The mere fact that this debate is going on is great. The region that's better positioned to have its mobility provided by public transit will be more economically competitive."

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