

Two groups driving future of transit in Clark County

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On a gloomy, rainy morning in the not-too-distant future, Jane D. Commuter drives from her Battle Ground home to the Salmon Creek Park & Ride and begins her daily trip to work in Portland.

She boards a waiting streetcar and sits down to check her e-mail and sip her coffee — let's call it a two-pump, fair-trade, whole-grain, organic, union-picked, medium glycemic macchiato with whip. The streetcar stops at Kiggins Bowl, and she transfers to a rapid-transit bus that takes her across the new Interstate 5 Bridge to Delta Park, where she transfers again to light rail for the trip to downtown Portland.

If you're counting, Jane's trip to work required a car, a streetcar, a bus and a train, not to mention walking. She had to leave home by 6:15 a.m. to get to work by 8.

This isn't some commuter nightmare. It's an entirely plausible scenario that could develop as two separate organizations study new mass-transit systems for Clark County. Both groups are trying to improve the commute, but the result could mean two different systems, or more, bringing multiple transfers and longer commute times.

"We should be concerned," said Vancouver Mayor Royce Pollard. "We need to see how these things blend together and how much they cost. But there could be a need for separate systems. It depends on what you're using them for."

Portland, after all, has numerous systems for different needs: buses, light rail, streetcars and, opening in September 2008, the 14.7-mile Beaverton-to-Wilsonville commuter rail.

Independent studies

The two Clark County projects are developing independently of each other. And while each watches what the other is doing, neither is bound to follow the decisions of the other and could conceivably wind up creating entirely different transportation systems.

Here's what they're up to:

- The Columbia River Crossing is evaluating both light rail and bus rapid transit as the mass-transit component for its new bridge. The draft environmental impact statement, expected by the end of the year, is looking at one route along the east side of Interstate 5 and another north along Main Street, both winding up at a park-and-ride lot north of 39th Street.

A final selection — on both a mass-transit mode and the whole bridge project itself — is expected in 2008. The search then begins for money, with perhaps \$6 billion for the whole shebang: the new bridge, mass transit and related interchanges, bridges, overpasses and such on both sides of the river.

- The Regional Transportation Council, meanwhile, narrowed its choices to four modes — bus rapid transit, streetcar, light rail and commuter rail — and five corridors. The final RTC plan may select one mode in one corridor and an entirely different mode for another.

"No question about it," said Clark County Commissioner Steve Stuart, a member of both the Crossing and RTC committees. "We have a lot of different situations. We're not limited to a single mode."

Once complete, the RTC hopes to see its proposals accepted into the planning documents of local governments, including the county, the cities and C-Tran. Once written in that kind of bureaucratic stone, the study will either collect dust on the shelf or some agency will pick up the ball and start the kind of cooperative process necessary to build something on that scale.

The Columbia River Crossing, in other words, is planning to build something while the RTC study is only that — a study. At least for now.

Perfectly rational steps led us here.

Two years ago, the Crossing, on assignment from the Washington and Oregon governors, started planning in earnest to create a new I-5 bridge that will have mass transit not exactly as an afterthought but as, let's say, an additional component. The project dwells in what's called the "bridge impact area," which doesn't extend beyond inner Vancouver.

Last October, meanwhile, the RTC launched the Clark County High Capacity Transit System Study, as it's called, to look at a mass-transit solution for the entire county, not just the bridge impact area. The process includes elected officials, businesses, the building industry and growth-control advocates. An RTC decision on mass transit is expected in 2008.

Both projects know the pitfalls of trying to meld separate transit systems. More transfers, they know, mean fewer riders and more headaches. If mass transit here is about getting more cars off the I-5 system, a commute like Jane D. Commuter's, with several transfers, doesn't offer much to lure riders from their cars.

A more seamless system, meanwhile, means faster commutes, cheaper operations and higher rider satisfaction.

Mayor favors light rail

Looming on the horizon, of course, is Portland's light-rail system, now at 44 miles but growing by eight miles when the new green line connects to Clackamas County in 2009. That means Clark County could connect to a much larger system for a comparatively smaller investment.

That doesn't necessarily mean either the RTC or Columbia River Crossing will choose light rail because the Portland system is near. But it does mean that the advantages of connecting to Portland's line will be factors in their deliberations.

Pollard has long been a backer of light rail for the new bridge project. He said it may make sense for Vancouver but may not answer all Clark County's transit questions.

"You don't need light rail all across Clark County," he said. "Within Clark County, we need a system that moves people smartly." He'd like to look into digging up old trolley tracks that may still be imbedded in Vancouver's main arterials like Mill Plain Boulevard or Fourth Plain Boulevard.

What works for Clark County, said Dean Lookingbill, RTC's transportation director, may not be the same as what works for Portland or what works for a bridge.

"We can see what a Springfield did or a Portland did," he said, "but it's all about what we decide is best for us."

He described the RTC effort as trying to define Clark County's next transportation backbone, sort of an interstate highway for the 21st century. It's a complex effort that must find a method — or methods — appropriate in Clark County's urban, suburban and rural settings. Studying the methods and corridors now, he said, will prepare the county for when it's ready to launch a system.

"We're asking, 'What's this future system going to be?' It then becomes the template, the framework that we'll continue to look at," Lookingbill said.

The Crossing, meanwhile, is in the process of studying two routes through Vancouver that would be good for either bus rapid transit or light rail. One goes north through downtown Vancouver on, perhaps, a one-way couplet on both Broadway and Main Street and ending at a park-and-ride lot north of Kiggins Bowl.

But the route remains uncertain and depends in part on a series of community meetings, said Danielle Cogan, spokeswoman for the Crossing

"By no means," she said, "is this a done deal."

As a member of both task forces, Stuart will get a chance to cast votes on both plans. He said he could easily vote for one mode for the Crossing and a completely different system — or systems — for the RTC.

"If we want to be successful," he said, "we cannot have multibillion-dollar light-rail trains running to Battle Ground. We have to size the transit for the need. We can't assume a one-size-fits-all scenario, because Clark County isn't a one-size-fits-all place."

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