

Area officials to go on bus tour

Thursday, October 25, 2007

DON HAMILTON, Columbian staff writer

A handful of local elected officials head south on a road trip to the college town of Eugene, Ore., Friday to learn for themselves what bus rapid transit is all about.

The bus trip aims to brief local transportation thinkers and policy makers on bus rapid transit, one of the mass transit modes under consideration in two studies under way in Clark County.

In January, Lane Transit District, the Eugene-Springfield area's transit agency, opened its bus rapid transit line, the Emerald Express, or EmX for short. It's an express bus operating at times on its own lane, with fewer stops and a greater passenger capacity than regular buses. It takes 15 minutes to make the four-mile trip between Springfield and downtown Eugene.

"It's an informational, fact-finding kind of thing," said Dean Lookingbill, transportation manager for the Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council, which organized the tour. "No decisions will be made."

They could if they want to. A quorum from both the Clark County Board of Commissioners - two of three commissioners - and the Vancouver City Council - four of the seven council members - plans to join the trip.

An option in two studies

The Columbia River Crossing plans to run either light rail or bus rapid transit on the new Interstate 5 bridge it's planning. A decision on the mode will come this winter. A route hasn't been chosen, but it would run roughly three miles north from the river to the Lincoln neighborhood.

The Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council is also studying high-capacity mass transit, not just for Vancouver but the whole county. The study is looking at what types of transit systems in which corridors would make sense considering the county's expected growth. The project has no authorization to construct anything.

The Vancouver chapter of the American Institute of Architects has also been exploring the idea of running streetcars through Vancouver, not so much as a commuter connection but as a way to link Vancouver neighborhoods.

The elected officials on the Friday trip will play a part in making the mass transit choices that are looming in the months ahead.

Clark County won't be asked to approve the Columbia River Crossing plan, but the three county commissioners are members of the C-Tran board, which will have a say in the decision.

Update

Previously: Bus rapid transit and light rail are being considered in two mass transit studies under way in Clark County.

What's new: On Friday, local elected officials and planners will visit the bus rapid transit line serving the Eugene-Springfield area in Oregon.

What's next: The Columbia River Crossing task force expects to choose a mass transit mode for the planned new Interstate 5 bridge sometime next spring.

The Vancouver City Council has a more active role. The council is helping design the mass transit route the crossing group will employ in its final plan, be it for light rail or bus rapid transit. The council may also be asked to sign off on the final bridge plan approved by the Columbia River Crossing.

Filling the bus

Lookingbill said the trip will include about two dozen people, elected officials and transportation staff members. In addition to the county board and the city council, the trip will include the representatives of the C-Tran Board and the Regional Transportation Council.

The Vancouver group will depart by bus for Eugene intending to arrive at the Lane Transit offices in time for lunch and a midday briefing from Mark Pangborn, LTD's general manager. The group then will tour the line and return to the LTD office before beginning the trip back to Vancouver.

Vancouver Mayor Royce Pollard prefers light rail as the mass transit method for a new bridge. But he wants to learn more about bus rapid transit, especially the opportunities for development around the stations.

"I want to see what it has to offer," he said. "I'll keep an open mind."

There aren't enormous cost differences between light rail and bus rapid transit on a new bridge. A report by the Columbia River Crossing showed light rail would add 5 percent more to the overall cost of a new bridge than bus rapid transit. Operating costs of light rail would also be lower, the report said.

In its planning six years ago, LTD compared light rail and bus rapid transit and decided the area lacked the population density to make light rail work. More than 200,000 people live in the Eugene-Springfield area while Clark County has about 400,000.

LTD's first four-mile line opened in January, and a 7.8-mile extension is scheduled to open by 2010 and maybe 50 miles more in the future.

Lookingbill said planners were lucky to have an example of bus rapid transit nearby.

"You can go across the river and see the light rail and streetcar," he said, "but it's a little further to see the other kind of high-capacity transit."

Don Hamilton can be reached at 360-759-8010 and don.hamilton@columbian.com.