

Task force gets on the bus for transit

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By **MICHAEL ANDERSEN**, Columbian Staff Writer

Last year, local officials asked a 13-resident task force to recommend future mass transit routes along Fourth Plain Boulevard, Highway 99 and other Clark County thoroughfares.

And a funny thing happened on the way to city hall: Almost everyone on the task force, even those who signed up with visions of rail-cars in their eyes, decided that whatever happens with the Interstate 5 Bridge, the interior of Clark County won't be ready for light rail for 20 years or more.

Instead, the group emerged last month with conclusions that a fleet of extra-large buses running in dedicated lanes — called bus rapid transit, or BRT — would be cheaper, more likely to win federal funding, and almost as fast as trains.

"If we were a more urbanized county, more like downtown Portland and such, light rail would be a must," said Lora Caine, a former president of the environmental group Friends of Clark County and a task force member. "You lean for [rail], and then you see the reality. And the reality is it would cost a whole lot more."

The task force wasn't addressing what sort of transit should run across the I-5 bridge — in fact, even anti-rail people in the group said they'd accept a rail line from Portland to Clark College.

But on Mill Plain and Fourth Plain boulevards, up I-5 and Highway 99 and along Interstate 205 in east Vancouver, the task force strongly agreed that light rail would attract too few riders to make itself worthwhile.

Along I-205, in fact, the estimated cost of one train ride, including construction costs, would be as high as \$14 — far more than riders seem likely to pay, or taxpayers to subsidize.

Bus rapid transit could serve the same route for up to \$3.83 per passenger, according to the estimate.

"It's flexible," Kathy McDonald, a task force member, said of BRT. "It accommodates a lot of the needs. And it's a whole lot cheaper."

Also key to the group's decision: federal funding. Working with transportation consultants and staff from several public agencies, the task force concluded that no light rail route in the county would have better than a "poor" chance of federal support.

Dale Robins, a planner for the local Regional Transportation Council, said the cost of building rail is such that it's next to impossible without federal help.

Bus rapid transit, the study found, would stand an "average" chance of winning federal funding on both Fourth Plain and Highway 99.

Did you know?

How much one high-capacity transit ride would cost, counting construction and operation, on each corridor:

- Fourth Plain: up to \$4.15 for rail, \$2.64 for bus rapid transit.
- I-5/Highway 99: up to \$2.71 for rail, \$1.55 for BRT.
- I-205: up to \$14 for rail, \$3.83 for BRT.
- Mill Plain: no rail option, up to \$2.08 for BRT.

Note: Costs on Highway 99 are defrayed by elimination of some bus service.

Rail would be slightly faster, the study found. For example, a rail trip from Salmon Creek along Highway 99 to downtown Portland would take 47 minutes, compared to 58 minutes for BRT without a dedicated lane.

Also, the data used to build the task force's study doesn't reflect current gas prices — it was based on commuters' behavior in the mid-1990s, when gas prices were near their historic lows.

Robins said the Portland-area transit agencies are preparing to update that data next year, but it won't be ready until after the Clark County study has wrapped up.

"We like to try to update it about every 15 years, because they're very expensive to do," Robins said.

It's unclear whether current high gas prices would boost light rail ridership more than it would boost BRT ridership.

"We assume that fuel costs will have the same impact on all of them," Robins said.

Also, there's no telling whether cars will run on gas, electricity or something else by 2030, let alone what any of it will cost.

The task force meets this week to refine its report, which will eventually be offered to a steering committee of elected officials, which will, late in the fall, make recommendations to the Regional Transportation Council's board.

The council will use those recommendations to advise local governments on preserving land for the mass transit routes.

Mike Bomar, political director for the local Building Industry Association and an early bus advocate on the task force, said the group's opinions on light rail changed over the course of the last year.

"I felt like a black sheep when I first came into that group," he said.

But the wind shifted, he said.

"I think most people, including myself, would love to have light rail to their back door," Bomar said. "But when you start having these discussions about cost ... I think you become more realistic."

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