

In our view: More bus lines?

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Editorials

Unfortunately, local discussions about public transportation often are reduced to shouting matches about light rail. Clark County, though, is best served by a full review of all transportation options. Although The Columbian supports extending Portland's MAX light rail Yellow Line across the Columbia River on a new Interstate 5 bridge, that project — if it ever even happens — should be viewed as only one component in a broad public transportation system.

Fortunately, experts and elected officials on the Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council steer clear of shouting matches and focus on facts and detail-oriented projections. Last Tuesday the council met to formalize a plan that identifies four corridors for high-capacity transit across Clark County. As Erik Robinson reported in The Columbian, those corridors are Fourth Plain, Highway 99, Mill Plain Boulevard and Interstate 205 extending to Portland's Gateway transit center.

Here's what might have caught the attention of those who engage in shouting matches about light rail: It's nowhere among the RTC recommendations that include a mixture of buses running on dedicated lanes, buses in traffic, a hybrid of both or buses using special shoulder lanes only when traffic is congested.

Does that mean that the RTC is anti-light rail? No, it just means the RTC is properly committed to exploring all transportation options. Tuesday's recommendations do not affect the ongoing research and public debate over the Columbia River Crossing, the new bridge and any new light-rail lines.

In fact, it's possible — perhaps even likely — that our local transit system several decades into the future will include buses, bus rapid transit, light rail, any combination thereof, plus any other mode of travel that technology serves up between now and then.

In Portland, there is no "battle" between light rail and the bus system. Both serve the public in various ways, each complementing the other. Many observers would like to have more of one system and less of the other, but few would argue for the exclusion of one and total dedication to the other.

Proponents of light rail in Clark County understand that it would only be a relatively short, two-mile extension of the MAX line across the river, through downtown Vancouver and to Clark College. There's no way of knowing if that line would ever be extended. Even if it never reaches farther, Clark County commuters and other transit riders will have been connected to a vast and growing, multi-billion-dollar light rail system already flourishing just across the river throughout Portland.

The only problem with having multiple transit systems is that cross-system transfers (say, buses to light rail) can be inconvenient. But if the transfers pencil out, and if the experts approve, then such a plan deserves public support.

The RTC should not be viewed by light-rail critics as any kind of ally in their bid to keep light rail on the other side of the river. The council's members include selected legislators, county and city politicians, transit administrators and state and local transportation directors. There's every reason

to believe their reports and recommendations are thoroughly researched and thoughtfully presented.

So let the public transportation evolution continue, with all its puzzle pieces falling into place as they best serve people who are eager to get out of their cars and let someone else do the driving.

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