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The fast lane

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Can buses compete with light rail?



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Light rail has been in the news a lot lately, but is light rail really the best alternative for Clark County? That is what a new study hopes to find out. With a \$1.488 million grant from the Federal Transit Administration, together with \$372,000 in matching funds contributed by local jurisdictions, the Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council has kicked off the Clark County High Capacity Transit System Study. This study promises an in-depth look into the need for a high capacity transit loop connecting Interstate 5 to Interstate 205 through Clark County, perhaps across the Fourth Plain/ State Route 500 corridor. The study will analyze various locations for a transit corridor, as well as the different alternative modes of high capacity transit available.

High capacity transit comes in a wide variety of shapes and flavors. Although light rail is most familiar to Portlanders because of Portland's MAX system, San Francisco relies on a combination of heavy rail with its BART system and street cars with its historic cable car service. Seattle has its monorail, as does Las Vegas and several cities in Japan. But perhaps the most promising form of high capacity transit is Bus Rapid Transit, or BRT for short.

BRT systems are only just beginning to be developed in the United States. The cities of Eugene, Los Angeles and Seattle all have limited BRT service as part of their transit systems. What distinguishes BRT from ordinary bus service is that BRT buses travel predominately, or in some cases exclusively, on separated roadways that are not available for automobile use. BRT systems can include elevated platforms similar to a light rail stop. They can also include priority attention at traffic signals. And, since BRT buses have rubber tires, they can be used to provide a seamless connection with existing bus stations and the traditional bus system.

However, perhaps the biggest advantage of BRT over light rail is the cost. The capital costs of constructing a BRT system can be as much as 40 to 70 percent less than light rail according to some studies. Since the cost of constructing light rail can be as much as \$100 million per mile, the potential savings offered by BRT are huge. The extent of the cost savings depends upon the type of infrastructure built into the BRT system. The number of and frequency of stations, for instance, can greatly affect cost as well as travel times, since more stations mean more frequent stops.

When the need for high capacity transit is balanced with the need for other transportation improvements in Clark County, the case for a cost-effective transit system becomes compelling. The Columbia River Crossing project is looking at spending upwards of \$4 billion on a new I-5 bridge, with lanes for either light rail or BRT. Meanwhile, Clark County is struggling to raise the \$155 million needed to fund the improvements to the I-5 interchange in the Salmon Creek area. According to the Washington

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State Department of Transportation, further improvements to this interchange will be needed in the relatively near future to accommodate growth.

The other interchanges north along I-5 are also in need of improvement. Clark County's proposed Comprehensive Growth Management Plan envisions growth of industrial and employment centers in these areas. The goal is to increase family wage jobs in Clark County so residents don't need to commute south to Portland to find employment. This strategy also relieves congestion along the I-5 corridor by drawing traffic to the north. Improvements to the I-5 interchanges will be an important component in achieving these goals, but those improvements won't be cheap, and we can't rely exclusively on federal money for these projects.

Federal grants are available to construct high capacity transit, but these grants cover only about half the cost. The other half must come from matching funds raised by state and local government. Over the next decade, Clark County and the local jurisdictions within Clark County will be faced with some difficult choices about how to raise funds for transportation improvements and how to most wisely spend those funds among competing transportation projects.

Both the Regional Transportation Council and the Columbia River Crossing project are soliciting public input on these important questions. For detailed information on the progress of these agencies, or to learn how to become involved in this process, interested persons can visit these agencies' websites: www.columbiarivercrossing.org and www.rtc.wa.gov.

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