

SR-35 Columbia River Crossing Feasibility Study



SR-35/COLUMBIA RIVER CROSSING FEASIBILITY STUDY AND DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

PUBLIC OPEN HOUSE/HEARING

January 22, 2004

SUMMARY OF COMMENTS

Prepared February 4, 2004

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

About 20 people attended this public hearing/open house to discuss the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the SR-35 Columbia River Crossing Feasibility Study. The open house was announced in public notices and news articles in the *Hood River News* and *White Salmon Enterprise*, as well as in press releases to local newspapers in The Dalles and Skamania County. In addition, people who had previously expressed interest in the project by attending meetings or providing written or e-mail comments were notified directly via mail or e-mail. Attendees participated in the following activities:

- Reviewed maps and aerial photos of each of the alternatives evaluated in the DEIS.
- Reviewed a summary of impacts and benefits of the preliminary preferred alternative based on evaluation and findings in the DEIS.
- Reviewed a summary of the schedule and process for the project.
- Listened to a presentation about the project, including a discussion of the background and process for the study; a summary of findings in the DEIS, comparing impacts and benefits of each alternative, including the “no-action” alternative; next steps and status of funding for additional study and implementation of the preferred alternative.
- Had the opportunity to participate in a subsequent question and answer session and complete written comment forms.
- Had the opportunity to provide individual verbal testimony/comments about the DEIS to a court reporter.

A more detailed description of the presentation and discussion begins on page 2.

SUMMARY OBSERVATIONS

- Very few written and verbal comments were provided at the meeting. No written comment forms were returned at the event, though more may be returned by e-mail or fax before the deadline of February 17. Only one person provided verbal testimony to the court reporter. Only two questions were asked of project team members after their presentation.
- Verbal comments provided by a single individual focused on several topics, including ability of the existing bridge to carry legal weight limits; current and future plans for one-way toll booths or electronic toll machines; establishment of a bridge replacement fund; need for improvements to nearby I-84 interchanges; impacts on adjacent properties; and minor inconsistencies in the document.

PRESENTATION

Matt Hastie of Cogan Owens Cogan, Chuck Green of Parsons Brinckerhoff, Paul Korsmo of Entranco, and Dale Robins of the Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council (RTC) provided participants with a brief summary and status report for the project, a summary of key findings included in the DEIS, and an opportunity to ask questions or make comments. Matt Hastie welcomed participants, noting that the main purpose of the meeting was to provide comments about the DEIS, verbally or via written comment forms. He noted that a court reporter also was available to accept individual verbal testimony.

Matt indicated that since the previous public meeting, the project team has further documented impacts of the bridge crossing alternatives and completed the DEIS which was released for public review in early January, 2004. Prior to public release, the DEIS was distributed state and federal agencies to for a preliminary review. Comments from those agencies were incorporated in the revised draft released for public review. Matt introduced Chuck Green who provided an overview of the process used to identify the alternatives studied in the DEIS.

Over the course of the last three years, the project team, managed by representatives of the Southwest Washington Regional Transportation Council (RTC), Oregon and Washington State Departments of Transportation (ODOT and WSDOT) have reviewed, narrowed and evaluated a variety of river crossing alternatives. The study began with a review of five separate crossing corridors, ranging from a western corridor, located near the Columbia River Gorge Hotel, to an east corridor, between Stanley Rock and the City of Bingen. Each of these corridors initially included multiple types of crossings. Bridges, tunnels, water and aerial crossings were reviewed in the initial stages of the project. Ultimately, these corridors and alternative crossing types were narrowed through a series of analyses to three bridge alternatives in a single corridor located near

the existing bridge. Two alternatives are west of the bridge (EC-1 and EC-2); a third is just east of the existing bridge (EC-3). Public comment has played a significant role in selection of the alternatives studied in the DEIS.

The DEIS assesses the environmental impacts of each of the alternatives described above, as well as a “No Action” alternative. The No Action alternative assumes some improvements to the existing bridge, including a re-decking project, scheduled to be undertaken within the next year, and installation of a traffic signal on SR-14 at the north end of the bridge. The No Action alternative assumes the remaining useful life of the existing bridge is about 30 years. After that point, it is assumed that the cost to maintain and operate the bridge will exceed the revenues available from tolls. The far west alternative (EC-1) is the most different of the three action alternatives, primarily because it would connect to Dock Grade Road on the Washington side of the river, rather than directly to SR-14. This would necessitate significant improvements to Dock Grade.

Each action alternative would be designed to accommodate all modes of travel, including cars, trucks, bicycles and pedestrians. Each would be designed to eventually accommodate a third (reversible) travel lane to meet 75-year traffic projections and needs. EC-2 has been identified as the preliminary preferred alternative because of lower adverse impacts overall. Meeting participants were encouraged to comment on this and the other alternatives during the meeting.

Next, Paul Korsmo summarized some of the key findings in the DEIS, focusing on differences among the impacts associated with each alternative, as well as benefits of the preferred alternative in comparison to the No Action alternative. Paul discussed both short term impacts associated with construction and long term impacts related to the effects of the bridge being in place. Summary findings included the following:

- **Right-of-way.** Each action alternative would require some acquisition of right-of-way on the Oregon side of the river. The EC-1 alternative would have the largest impact on the Washington side, necessitating acquisition of a business (nursery) and full or partial acquisition of a home.
- **Transportation.** All three action alternatives would have short term impacts associated with construction, including delays and possible detours, though the existing bridge would remain open during construction of a new bridge. The EC-3 alternative also would result in no access to the existing Bridge Market property from the westbound lanes on SR-14.
- **Vegetation.** All three action alternatives would impact riparian area vegetation on both sides of the river. The EC-1 alternative would have the greatest impacts on the Washington side because it would necessitate widening Dock Grade Road, which in turn would require slope cutting and stabilization. These activities also would result in greater visual effects, as well as water quality impacts due to increased

water runoff and sedimentation. A large oak tree on the Washington side of the bridge would be impacted by EC-3.

- **Historic/Cultural.** All three action alternatives would have impacts because the existing bridge is expected to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Demolition of the existing bridge likely would be conditioned on documentation of that structure, including photo documentation and possibly creating interpretive exhibits describing the history of the existing bridge.
- **Archeological resources.** The EC-2 and EC-3 alternatives could impact archeological sites. The EC-3 alternatives appears to have greater impacts on these resources. These impacts would be verified further as part of completion of a final environmental impact statement (FEIS).
- **In-water work.** Each action alternative would have impacts on fish species and other aquatic life during the course of constructing new bridge piers and other activities taking place in and over the river. Impacts would be related to sedimentation, possible spillage of construction materials (e.g., from machinery and concrete), noise and vibration. Impacts would be similar for all action alternatives.

Long-term benefits of the preliminary preferred alternative, in comparison to the No Action alternative include:

- **Transportation.** Traffic mobility, safety and access to all modes of travel would be improved, including creation of bicycle and pedestrian facilities not currently available. The navigation channel also would be widened, improving navigability for barges and other river traffic.
- **Economic.** Improved mobility of people and goods across the river would be expected to have positive economic benefits for communities on both sides of the Columbia.
- **Fish species.** The new bridge would have fewer piers in the water, reducing habitat for predator fish species that prey on migrating salmonid species.
- **Noise.** While there would be a slight increase in noise levels overall, the higher pitched hum associated with the metal decking on the existing bridge would be lessened considerably or eliminated.

These and other impacts are described in more detail in the DEIS.

Next, Dale Robins briefly discussed the status of funding preparation of an FEIS and construction of a new bridge. He also discussed next steps in the DEIS process. Those activities include the following:

- Review and summarize public comments provided at this meeting, as well as those submitted in writing or via e-mail. Comments will be available via the project Web site or in hard copy format upon request.

- Prepare a FEIS. An FEIS would respond to comments on the DEIS, evaluate some impacts in more detail (e.g., archeological impacts), and include partial design of a new bridge. Funding for an FEIS has not been secured, though local congressional representatives on the Washington side of the river have indicated support for the project and a willingness to pursue federal funding.

Further study and construction of a new bridge depends in large part on support from the local community. Local community support, including support from congressional delegates, resulted in funding for the current feasibility study and DEIS. A similar effort will be needed to ensure funding for an FEIS and new construction. This is particularly important given limited state funds for transportation construction and very heavy competition among a long list of transportation improvement projects in both states. Local matching funding through tolls or other means also probably will be essential for financing a new bridge. In closing, Dale thanked the Port of Hood River for its continued involvement in and support of the study, as well as for providing bridge toll tokens to participants at each public meeting.

QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS

Only one participant asked a question, inquiring about the acronym DEIS. Matt Hastie responded that EIS stands for environmental impact statement. The “D” in DEIS stands for draft, while the “F” in FEIS stands for final.