

Clark frets light rail's effects on campus

By **JEFFREY MIZE**

Columbian staff writer

Clark College isn't ready to climb aboard the push for light rail.

Concerns about traffic congestion, pedestrian safety, security, crime and the loss of college property will need to be addressed before officials are ready to endorse a light-rail terminus at their campus.

The college's concerns are in contrast to what appears to be growing support for a Clark College terminus.

During her Feb. 8 State of the County speech, Commissioner Betty Sue Morris said she was prepared to support light rail if it ended at the college because the federal government would pay the entire construction cost.

Last week, Vancouver transportation officials recommended a Clark College terminus to the city council, primarily because it has the lowest construction cost per rider.

On Monday, college trustees adopted a resolution that supports replacing the Interstate 5 Bridge and extending light rail into Vancouver, but the board will wait before en-

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The debate

Should Clark College be the terminus for an extension of light rail into Vancouver?

■ **On one side:**

Light rail and improved bus service would provide additional ways for students and employees to get to campus. Clark College also would contribute toward solving a chronic transportation problem and building a more transit-oriented community.

■ **On another side:**

Only about 2 percent of Clark students live in Oregon. That tiny benefit is not worth major problems created by a thousand or more commuters driving to a Park & Ride, further snarling congested streets, including the spot where a Clark student was critically injured in 2002.

Clark College:

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dorsing one of four terminuses being considered.

College President Bob Knight will take that direction to the June 24 meeting of the Columbia River Crossing Task Force, a bi-state group that likely will propose a package of bridge, highway and transit improvements that could cost as much as \$4.1 billion.

The college also will mount an intensive 30- to 45-day community process to evaluate potential positive and negative effects of ending Vancouver's light-rail connection to the Portland MAX system at the former visitors center along I-5 north of McLoughlin Boulevard.

"The negatives outweigh the positives, but the negatives can be mitigated," Knight said before the beginning of Monday's meeting.

Crossing officials say a Clark College terminus would require 1,250 parking spaces, presum-

ably in a three-level Park & Ride garage at the former visitors center, with a few other spaces at a surface parking lot north of Kiggins Bowl.

Phil Sheehan, the college's interim vice president of administrative services, distributed a sheet to board trustees Monday that listed two positive and five negative effects of a light-rail terminus.

On the plus side for Clark College:

- Increased access to bus transit for students, with improved routes and schedules.

- The potential for future expansion of light rail to areas north and east of the college.

The negatives:

- Traffic congestion, particularly if motorists can enter the Park & Ride garage from McLoughlin Boulevard. Access to student parking lots could be impaired by additional traffic, so much so that the college might have to install traffic signals.

- Safety concerns for pedestrians along Fort Vancouver Way and McLoughlin Boulevard.

- Less parking for students. Overflow from the Park & Ride could gobble up street parking and spill into the college's lots, requiring a parking permit system for students and increased parking patrols.

- Security concerns, including worries that an unattended Park & Ride garage could attract criminal activity.

- Loss of college property, namely the former visitors center, which is being used by the athletic department. The college's long-term plans call for redevelopment of the site.

John White, a board trustee, wondered if Monday's resolution should at least mention concerns about a Clark College terminus for light rail.

"I would just not want to have somebody take this resolution out of context and say, 'Well, they are on board,'" he said.

Trustees decided that a letter to the Columbia River Crossing office, along with minutes of Monday's meeting and the college's comments on the project's draft environmental impact study, would be adequate to relay those concerns.

Sheehan said it's possible the crossing project would revamp the Fourth Plain Boulevard freeway interchange and provide easier access from Interstate 5 to the Park & Ride, thereby eliminating the need to have access from McLoughlin Boulevard.

College officials likely will be looking for other items to make a light-rail terminus more palatable, namely assurances that security and crime won't be ignored and money for road and pedestrian improvements.

Fort Vancouver Way already is considered a hazardous spot for pedestrians.

In 2002, a French exchange student was struck by a car as she walked across the street. She suffered brain damage severe enough to need 24-hour care for the rest of her life. The city and its insurer subsequently agreed to a \$6 million settlement.

In the past six months, a motorist struck a person in a wheelchair, but there were no serious injuries, Knight said prior to Monday's meeting.

One potential solution would be lowering Fort Vancouver Way to create a pedestrian plaza over the busy street. Knight said he suspects some students would not use an elevated pedestrian bridge, which would be far cheaper to build than lowering the four-lane street.