

Light-rail focus turns to college

Clark College's board met Monday, concerned about a possible light-rail terminus on campus. The board is worried about potential safety issues for pedestrians, traffic congestion, criminal activity, loss of land and parking for students.

Light rail stemming from a new Interstate 5 bridge could benefit the college by increasing student access, the board acknowledges. But Columbian reporter Jeffrey Mize quoted college President Bob Knight with this glass-half-empty view: "The negatives outweigh the positives."

Knight did add that the "negatives can be mitigated."

The concerns Clark has about light rail headed its direction are some of the same concerns cited by community members should light rail wind up in their backyard or in front of their business addresses. However legitimate or unfounded Clark's concerns are, one thing is certain: The college just legitimized those concerns for the rest of the community.

Clark's worrying is a good thing. The college will be courted, whereas neighborhood groups and residents only need to be tolerated.

At neighborhood meetings I attend and in conversations I've had with bridge planners and other officials, concerns voiced by everyday folks don't seem to be taken as seriously as they should. Planners seem content to ask people to take their word for it, that increased crime won't occur and that light-rail designs will be so advanced that traffic congestion and pedestrian safety shouldn't be a problem. When officials don't seem to be getting through to "critics," they often resort to telling residents that someone has to take one for the team — as in the region needs transportation solutions and you are likely to be a part of it, never mind your home values, your peace of mind, your quality of life or transit alignments that make more sense.

I think Vancouver will benefit from light rail or bus rapid transit across the river. For starters, the inclusion of a mass-transit component on the bridge is said to be necessary if we want the feds to pay for construction costs. And we do.

Bus rapid transit is appealing, as you don't have to marry buses to fixed routes and fixed tracks, which could be good for our ever-changing county. But the maintenance and operation cost is said to be higher than that of light rail and ridership likely lower, as rail cars would hook seamlessly into Portland's already existing system. For that reason, I lean toward light rail. Mass transit success would help the region's environmental footprint. And having more people using mass transit will allow remaining drivers the chance to get from Point A to Point Somewhere more quickly. But bridge planners seem to continue pressing for light-rail alignments that aren't best for Vancouver, even though they might be best for the project's bottom line.

Focus on commuters

Local leadership does seem on the right path, with city councilors, city transportation officials, Clark County Commissioner Betty Sue Morris and others pointing light rail away from neighborhoods and Uptown Village and toward Clark College. Why not put light rail in a come-and-go people place like a college instead of a neighborhood? Light rail for the river crossing is all about commuters, not urban renewal. If Clark's concerns about safety, crime and congestion are legit, those concerns are even more legitimate for neighborhoods and better handled on a campus where security and safety are already enhanced.

A Clark College terminus makes sense for light rail's debut in Vancouver. The college is right off the freeway and Clark is a public entity. If someone needs to take one for the team, why not the collective? Columbia River Crossing ought not invite thousands of cars to drive through residential streets or ruin the good thing Uptown Village has going. Light rail can and often does improve the landscape when the landscape in question is blight. For that matter, future rails on Highway 99 or Fourth Plain would be a great bet for improving that area. But putting light rail in the middle of an aesthetically pleasing, pedestrian-flocking area is lunacy.

I hope the college terminus is selected. Not only because it seems to make the most sense out of current options, but because Clark's trustees have power typical NIMBYs don't. As Knight said, the "negatives can be mitigated." That's especially true if Clark is involved.

ELIZABETH HOVDE



ELIZABETH HOVDE's column of personal opinion appears on the Other Opinions page each Thursday. Reach her at ehovde@earthlink.net.