

Light-rail idea gets city OK

Vancouver council first of six bodies to vote on proposal

By **JEFFREY MIZE**
Columbian staff writer

Vancouver believes that light rail, as part of the Columbia River Crossing project, should come through downtown using a couplet system before heading east on McLoughlin Boulevard to Clark College.

The Vancouver City Council became the first local government Monday to formally endorse replacing the aging Interstate 5 Bridge with a new span carrying vehicles and light rail.

The council also went on record as preferring only two bridges to accommodate cars and trucks, light-rail cars, cyclists and pedestrians. This "stacked transit" option would eliminate the need for a third span for light rail and could save as much as \$150 million.

The Columbia River Crossing project aims to ease chronic congestion on I-5 between Washington and Oregon. The project, based on a Clark College light-rail terminus, could cost \$3.5 billion or more for bridge, highway and transit improvements.

The council took a series of votes on different aspects of the crossing project:

■ 7-0 for a replacement bridge, with preference for the stacked transit option.

■ 5-2 for light rail, with council members Pat Campbell and Jeanne Stewart voting against that form of high-capacity transit.



The Columbian

Update

■ Previously:

The 39-member Columbia River Crossing Task Force two weeks ago proposed replacing the Interstate 5 Bridge with a new crossing that would extend Portland's light-rail line into Vancouver.

■ What's new:

Vancouver became the first of six local governments to formally endorse a package of bridge, transit and highway improvements.

■ What's next:

C-Tran's board of directors will take action on the plan tonight, followed by the Portland City Council and TriMet board of directors on Wednesday.

Light rail:

From Page A1

■ 5-2 for ending the light-rail line at the former visitors center east of Interstate 5. Stewart and Councilwoman Jeanne Harris voted against the Clark College terminus.

The light-rail line would end near Clark College, rather than continuing along Main Street through Uptown Village to the Lincoln neighborhood. The Main Street option angered Uptown Village business owners and neighborhood groups.

Current planning calls for a Park & Ride that would have as many as 1,200 spaces near the college.

Harris said high-capacity transit needs to be as "rider-friendly" as possible, and one way to do that is to minimize transfers.

Bus rapid transit, which carries passengers on buses in dedicated traffic lanes, would require commuters to transfer at the Expo Center in north Portland. Light rail would provide a "one-seat ride" from Vancouver to

downtown Portland.

"Light rail is environmentally friendly, carries lots of people," Mayor Royce Pollard said.

"It will tie us into an outstanding system."

Councilman Larry Smith said he has slowly grown more receptive to light rail, particularly as fuel costs rise.

"I certainly get the reality," he said. "Although many folks will say that cars will be here forever, I think we'd better start looking at alternatives."

"If you don't get on board now and build it," Smith said about light rail, "it's only going to cost you more."

But Campbell said he believes the community would be better served by building a new bridge and providing enhanced bus service to light rail in Portland.

"This project is hugely expensive," he said. "And it's going to be very disruptive to our city, our citizens and our businesses."

"I am a light-rail fan," Campbell said.

"But I am a light-rail fan of having it over in Multnomah County, for now."

Stewart has been the most

persistent critic of light rail on the seven-member council, and she didn't shift her position during Monday's discussion.

Even with a Clark College terminus, it would be only a matter of time before an effort was made to extend light rail north along Main Street, which would, Stewart said, have disastrous effects for businesses and neighborhoods in west Vancouver.

"It is wasteful to align light rail in an area that doesn't need to be revitalized," she said. "I don't believe light rail is our best or our only opportunity for continued economic revitalization of our downtown."

Harris, however, argued that a Main Street alignment would allow businesses to grow and provide better transit access for residents, she said.

"I do believe it is a better option, for now and for the future," she said.

Stewart voted against the Clark College terminus after the council rejected her suggestion that any expansion of the light-rail line would need to be confined to the freeway

corridor.

The toll question

The city council's resolution is silent on the explosive issue of bridge tolls. Two weeks ago, the Columbia River Crossing Task Force proposed a bridge package that called for imposing tolls on the existing bridge "as soon as legally and practically permissible" to reduce congestion and provide an ongoing revenue source.

Two weeks ago, the council decided to remove any references indicating support, or even tacit acceptance, of tolls from the resolution approved Monday. Councilman Tim Leavitt led that charge, saying, "Tolling is a last resort."

The council voted 6-1 on June 23 to remove the tolling provision, with Pollard casting the sole vote to retain the language.

"Without tolling, I don't believe this bridge will be built," Pollard said two weeks ago.

Tolls are projected to be \$2.50 each way during rush hour. That's \$25 a week and more than \$1,200 a year for a driver who didn't carpool and used the new bridge to com-

mute to a daytime job in Oregon.

Commuters who purchase electronic transponders for paying tolls could get a break. Even if that reduces their costs by a third — tolls on the Tacoma Narrows Bridge, for example, are \$2.75 for vehicles with transponders and \$4 for those without — commuters would still pay more than \$800 a year in tolls.

In comparison, the federal government is expected to pick up the entire cost of light rail construction. C-Tran intends to ask voters to approve a sales tax increase to help pay for operations and maintenance, because fares are expected to cover only about 50 percent of those costs.

However, the envisioned sales tax increase is relatively small, potentially 0.05 percent, or 1 cent on a \$20 purchase. C-Tran is likely to propose a larger sales tax increase to maintain existing service with rising fuel costs and other expenses, as well as improve bus service as the county grows.

JEFF MIZE can be reached at 360-735-4542 or jeff.mize@columbian.com.