

The Columbia River Crossing Project: A Step Forward in Addressing Global Climate Change

By Gail Achterman

Working across state boundaries, regional transportation agencies are developing the Columbia River Crossing (CRC) project to address congestion, safety problems, and other transportation challenges on the Interstate Bridge and its approaches in both Oregon and Washington. The CRC is truly a 21st century transportation project, not a throwback to the freeway building binge of the 1950s and 60s that our region rightly rebelled against. This is the first project in the nation that would both improve existing highway facilities and provide new transit service across state lines over a large water body. It would also incorporate an excellent bicycle and pedestrian pathway to make crossing the Columbia River by non-motorized means a pleasant— rather than a harrowing— experience.

Nonetheless, the CRC is being criticized from some who believe that its impact on global climate change is simply too large. While I am absolutely committed to combating global climate change by reducing emissions from the transportation sector, I believe these criticisms are misplaced. This project performs well even when viewed through the climate change lens.

Induced Demand. Many highway projects are rightly criticized because they induce additional traffic: by expanding capacity and reducing congestion in the short term, these projects encourage people to take additional trips that otherwise would not have occurred. This criticism has been leveled at the CRC, but it does not hold up: modeling shows the project will actually *reduce* the total number of vehicles crossing the Columbia River in 2030, compared to not building the project. This is not to say that traffic will fall below current levels. With an additional million people moving into the region, traffic across the Columbia will increase even if we do nothing. However, the CRC will reduce that rate of growth.

The CRC reduces traffic growth for two reasons: First, it includes high-capacity transit—connecting the Expo Center to downtown Vancouver—that will carry an estimated 6.7 million riders each year. Ridership will be particularly high during rush hours, with 1 in 5 commuters taking public transportation, compared to only 1 in 20 transit users today. Second, in order to pay for the CRC, the new highway bridge will need to be tolled. This toll will help manage transportation demand, providing an incentive to choose public transit and discouraging some trips across the Columbia.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions. A CRC greenhouse gas (GHG) analysis has been done to compare all the project alternatives. The analysis shows that a replacement river crossing with a toll and light rail will produce less CO₂ than the No Build alternative (if we did nothing until 2030). The analysis is limited to the project area and broader state and regional analysis of GHG emissions is needed. The reductions in GHG emissions compared to no build for the CRC project will not, by themselves, get us to our state GHG emission goals, but the CRC is an improvement over doing nothing.

Some argue that the CRC should be held to a higher standard than this. They believe the project should reduce traffic volumes below current levels in order to meet our state's goal of a 75% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions below 1990 levels by 2050. I share this desire to cut greenhouse gas emissions significantly, but I do not believe it is realistic for a single project to bear the responsibility for this reduction. We will only achieve this goal through system-wide policy changes involving land use-transportation integration allowing reductions in vehicle miles travelled, low carbon fuels and more efficient vehicles.

All levels of government will need to foster system-wide changes to help us build more compact communities, with housing and stores located near employment centers and convenient public transportation service connecting them so people can commute shorter distances and can choose to drive or use transit. While the CRC and other transportation projects must contribute to meeting these goals, a single project such as this, with just eight-tenths of one percent of the region's freeway lane-miles, won't be able to make a significant dent in regional greenhouse gas emissions.

On the transportation side of the equation, reducing greenhouse gas emissions will require us to consider two key policies: significantly expanding mass transit service, and implementing tolling to reduce demand on the highway system. The Columbia River Crossing would do both. In that sense, it is a major forward step in our regional effort to reduce the carbon footprint of our transportation system.

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