



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

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## Summary

The I-5 Trade Partnership Task Force has ignored its mandate to improve traffic flow in Portland's Rose Quarter. Further, it advocates building a \$1.1 billion light rail line into Washington, absent any evidence that it will reduce congestion. Thus, a \$2.1 billion traffic improvement project will simply expand Metro-area gridlock.

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## Spending billions to create more congestion

By John A. Charles

During the past decade traffic congestion in the I-5 corridor between Portland and Vancouver, Washington has been getting steadily worse. There are now more than 60,000 daily commuters traveling across the Columbia River, and pass-through freight traffic continues to grow. At 5:00 p.m. on many weekdays the area south of the Interstate Bridge looks more like a parking lot than a highway.

Recognizing that this situation is unacceptable, the governors of Washington and Oregon initiated the Portland/Vancouver I-5 Transportation and Trade Partnership in January 2001. A 28-member Task Force was established to guide the development of a Strategic Plan for the corridor. The group included high-level political appointees such as TriMet general manager Fred Hansen, the Port of Portland's Bill Wyatt, and elected officials such as Multnomah County Commissioner Serena Cruz. The plan's purpose was to improve traffic flow in the I-5 corridor from the I-84 junction in Portland to the I-5/205 interchange in Vancouver.

The Task Force met for 18 months, and it was clear from the beginning that a majority of the Task Force members intended to use the process as an opportunity to extend costly light-rail into Vancouver, even though it would provide no congestion relief. They did this by arbitrarily expanding the scope of their study area east to the Glenn Jackson Bridge to justify a new light-rail loop that would run north from the Multnomah County Exposition Center over the Columbia River, east in the SR 500 corridor to I-205, and back over the Columbia to connect with Airport MAX. If built, the rail line's construction costs alone would exceed \$1.1 billion.

The Task Force also decided not to carry out the original assignment of improving traffic flow as far south as the Rose Quarter area of I-5, because influential members of the Task Force hope to actually tear out the eastbank freeway and get rid of the Marquam Bridge. Though it's hard to believe that anyone would take this concept seriously, it is vividly portrayed on Portland's official website for the so-called [River Renaissance project](#). Under the "vision" section of that site, the reader is greeted with a full-screen color sketch of the mayor's preferred

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future for Portland, which doesn't include the Marquam Bridge or the eastbank freeway. The website doesn't say where all the traffic currently on I-5 would go under this scenario.

The Task Force decided to make the Fremont Bridge the new southern border of their study area. Within that region, the group is recommending widening I-5 to three lanes all the way to the I-205 interchange in Vancouver; building a new Columbia River bridge; and expanding light-rail to Clark County. The highway improvements will help increase driving speed in North Portland, but south of the Fremont Bridge traffic will come to a screeching halt when motorists hit the Rose Quarter, where I-5 is only two lanes. The full strategic plan is available at [www.i-5partnership.com/assets/strategic\\_plan.pdf](http://www.i-5partnership.com/assets/strategic_plan.pdf).

The total cost of Task Force recommendations is more than \$2.1 billion, and will take at least 10 years to implement. It's difficult to understand why we would go to so much trouble just to move the traffic bottleneck from the Interstate Bridge to the Rose Quarter.

This month I testified before Metro's Transportation Alternatives Advisory Committee (TPAC) and urged the committee to reject the Task Force recommendations, because the Task Force had failed to carry out its mission. TPAC's response? It simply deleted the original mission language of the Task Force and restated that its goal was only to solve congestion north of the Fremont Bridge. This sleight-of-hand was later endorsed by the full Metro Council.

It's shameful that a group of public officials would simply ignore their charge from two governors, especially since widening I-5 to three lanes in the Rose Quarter is already part of Metro's official Regional Transportation Plan.

Transportation planning in Portland has clearly been captured by a radical group of car-hating politicians and bureaucrats. Governor Kitzhaber, in one of his last official acts, should reject the Strategic Plan of his own Task Force and require members to finish the job he assigned them. If they aren't willing to do that, he should get rid of them and appoint new members who actually want to solve traffic problems in Portland.

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