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East-side story

\$bull; Everyone talks about moving I-5 from the riverside. Has the time come? Hated Marquam Bridge is back in the sights of the civic-minded

BY DON HAMILTON

The Portland Tribune, Jan 18, 2002

The two-mile stretch of Interstate 5 that Portland loves to hate is under attack again.

Public officials once more are considering a proposal to tear out the freeway along the east bank of the Willamette River Ñ along with that inelegant bridge that feeds it, the Marquam.

It's not a new idea. Calls for their removal started not long after the bridge opened in 1966, and the idea returns to public debate every few years Ñ never fulfilled but never quite put to rest, either.

Still unclear is whether this new proposal represents the start of a real push toward approval or just another in a series of failed big ideas. In the months ahead, local officials will explore removing the freeway and whether the new plan is a good starting point.

The idea has drawn an anxious and doubtful response from leaders of the influential Central Eastside Industrial Council, who worry about changing one of Portland's oldest and most stable industrial areas.

This latest plan for relocating the freeway comes from a group called Riverfront for People, made up of veterans of earlier such campaigns. The group wants City Hall to take the lead in studying the many complications presented by removing the highway.

Already, several elected officials have signed the group's petition, including three Multnomah County commissioners Ñ Diane Linn, Maria Rojo de Steffey and Serena Cruz Ñ and numerous local state legislators.

Mayor Vera Katz, long a supporter of moving the freeway, says the city needs more information before deciding if this plan should progress. The process, she said, will be cautious, and nothing will happen without public

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support and the right combination of financial and political opportunities.



She told the City Club of Portland during her State of the City speech a year ago: "It's like having the Berlin Wall dividing east and west, with all the subtle charm of the Daytona 500 smack dab in the middle of our city."



The group studying the freeway has three proposals for how to remove it. No serious engineering studies have been done, and no price tags have been set. Here's a look at the ideas:



\$bull; Tunnel under the Willamette River. This plan calls for removal of the Marquam Bridge and the freeway north to Interstate 84. They would be replaced by a tunnel beginning on the west side and running under the river to the east side and then north, where it would surface again near the Rose Quarter.



A connection from the tunnel to the east-side business district would be included. The organization hopes to find a company willing to donate an engineering study.



\$bull; Bury the freeway under Seventh Avenue. Under this option, the Marquam Bridge and the freeway north to I-84 would be removed and Interstate 405 would be designated as I-5. A new double-decker bridge for local traffic would cross the Willamette, and a new road would be built under Southeast Seventh Avenue, linking with Interstate 84 to the north.



Seventh Avenue, the group's report says, is wide enough to accommodate a four-lane tunnel underneath without interfering with local businesses.



\$bull; Rip 'em out. This option calls for removing the Marquam Bridge and the freeway north to I-84 but adding nothing new. The plan also would designate I-405 as I-5. Traffic now carried through the Portland area on three freeways — I-5, I-405 and Interstate 205 — would be shifted to two.

"What they've put together is an extraordinarily ambitious and very complicated vision," said Don Mazziotti, executive director of the Portland Development Commission. "This is a valuable contribution to the dialogue about the city's future."

'This is a big one'

Riverfront for People takes its name and some of its members from the campaign to remove Harbor Drive from the river's west bank three decades ago, making way for Gov. Tom McCall Waterfront Park. It's trying to get Metro, Tri-Met, the Oregon Department of Transportation and Multnomah County to encourage the city to take the lead in studying its proposal.

In recent weeks, the group has been showing an 86-slide presentation on its proposal to business groups, neighborhood associations and elected officials. It's an ambitious and comprehensive report that looks at jobs, the economy, transportation and urban development.

City Commissioner Charlie Hales thinks the group has done a "stellar" job.

"This is a big one," he said. "This could be not just a topic of conversation but the big play for Portland's future."



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Members see removing the highway as an opportunity to create new housing, new offices and new public riverfront space while keeping the historic industrial district that's lived on the central east-side for most of the last century.

Hales likens its importance to removing Harbor Drive and taking out the old Meier & Frank parking garage to make way for Pioneer Courthouse Square Ñ both key milestones in the development of Portland public spaces.

"This is an investment in the future," said Ron Buel, the former Nike executive and founding editor of Willamette Week who's helping to spearhead the drive.

"This makes Portland a more livable city and produces a lot of benefits for us," Buel said. "Obviously, this isn't something that will happen in the next five years. If it happens, it will happen over the next 10 or 15 years."

The group has generated a lot of interest, a little suspicion and some doubt over the long-term prospects for success, especially considering the enormity of the project and the potential for huge expenses.

Mayor a wary backer

Katz, a supporter of removing the freeway since taking office in 1993, is cautious about the Riverfront for People proposals. She wants to make sure the freeway study works in sync with the Portland/Vancouver I-5 Transportation and Trade Partnership, which is looking at improvements to I-5 through North Portland to Hazel Dell in Clark County.

Much more information is needed, she said, before any further steps can be taken.

In 1992, during her first campaign for mayor, Katz estimated the cost of the freeway removal at \$20 million to remove the structure and \$283 million in improvements to nearby roads. Costs have risen in the past decade, however, and no new estimates have been prepared.

Certain about what it all means, though, is the Central Eastside Industrial Council. Its president is Michael Bolliger, owner of Bolliger & Sons, which has been insuring businesses in the area since 1946.

"Don't talk about moving the freeway," Bolliger said. "Build around it. This comes up every three to five years. My dad was president of the council in the 1980s, and he fought it back then. Every time they have nothing to talk about, they put this thing on the agenda. They're not going to go for it."

Bolliger said the area, with 18,000 jobs and 1,300 businesses, has grown in the past 10 years. A handful of local families have owned property in the neighborhood for several generations, among them the Corno, Gatto, Wentworth, Caruso and Burns families.

Problem from the start

The stretch of interstate in question opened in 1964 and came under attack not long after. George Baldwin, then head of the Oregon Transportation Commission, said in 1971 that the highway was "already obsolete." His son, Greg, a partner with the Zimmer Gunsul Frasca Partnership planning firm in Portland said it's a bad design that barely

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In 1999, 11 students from the Harvard Graduate School of Design studied the freeway, making two trips to Portland to conduct research and interviews with local business and government officials.

The students reviewed the relationship of rail and waterfront in a dozen cities on three continents, among them Singapore, Tokyo, Geneva, Cincinnati and Boston, where the \$4 billion "Big Dig" will bury a three-mile stretch of I-93 through the middle of the city.

The group's proposals for Portland included plans to move the freeway off the riverbank while expanding surface roads and increasing other types of transit, including streetcars, water taxis, light rail and high-speed rail. The reclaimed land could then accommodate new public spaces on the waterfront and retention of the local business in the neighborhood.

Critical to the neighborhood's good health, the group added, would be better truck access and reducing or eliminating storm-water runoff into the river.

"If the constraints are removed and the promise fulfilled," Greg Baldwin wrote in an afterword to the group's report, "the evolution of the Central Eastside may make a most critical contribution to the future of Portland's heart in this next century and beyond."

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