

DRAFT

Jane Lee's *Register Guard's* editorial response [600-800 word limit]

Sept. 18, 2008

By Jane Lee, ODOT Northwest Region manager

Few drivers today remember a time before interstate highways and clover-leaf interchanges allowed for the easy flow of traffic. Our modern road systems have become an integral part of our everyday lives. They provide smooth access to almost anywhere we want to go and are a vital part of the distribution system that keeps stores stocked with the goods we want to buy.

Bridges are vital components of our interstates, spanning divides and connecting communities. They aren't built in a day and, once built, they won't be replaced any time soon.

As the Oregon Department of Transportation repairs and replaces hundreds of bridges across the state as part of the OTIA III State Bridge Delivery Program, the agency recognizes that generations of Oregonians will drive on the bridges we build in the next four years – ODOT is truly leaving a legacy.

On the Interstate 5 Willamette River Bridge near Eugene, the agency saw an opportunity to design a distinctive bridge to enhance the entrance to the Eugene-Springfield area in the heart of the Willamette Valley.

As with all ODOT projects, communities affected by the Willamette River Bridge have opportunities to provide meaningful input into the design and construction.

Most Oregonians are not bridge engineers or bridge builders. For many people, a terminal expansion joint is where they board an airplane, the C-line is their morning train, and scouring involves more elbow grease than forces of nature. Yet ODOT looks to all Oregonians to play a vital role in one of the largest infrastructure projects in their state's history.

At the onset of designing this project, ODOT formed the Willamette River Bridge Community Advisory Group, comprising representatives from neighborhoods, recreation groups, parks and the University of Oregon, to help develop project goals and design considerations. This group worked side by side with representatives from ODOT, Lane County, and the cities of Eugene

and Springfield to identify the four most practical bridge types. Through open houses, online surveys and a self-guided bridge tour, ODOT gathered broader input from community members.

After more than 18 months of study, design and community outreach, ODOT selected a deck arch bridge type for the new I-5 span over the Willamette River. The decision was not made lightly. The agency weighed the need for a significant structure that minimizes visual impacts on views and the area's natural surroundings, along with environmental impacts and budget constraints. This design provides a practical structure with manageable maintenance requirements over the long term, within the budget, while meeting the community's desire for a distinctive structure.

Public input into the design process is vital to the bridge program's success; it's important to remember that this input is not a vote—it's part of a balancing act. For this multimillion dollar infrastructure project that will serve not only the Willamette Valley but also the entire West Coast, ODOT strove to find a balance between design characteristics the public wants and an affordable budget that responsibly uses transportation funding.

Escalating costs due to a variety of marketplace forces, including increasing gasoline, diesel, concrete, asphalt and steel prices, a damaged economy and high unemployment rates, are putting pressure on construction projects, and the Willamette River Bridge project is no exception. ODOT has responded to these pressures in a variety of ways to keep prices down, but the agency must continue to focus on its bottom line: It has to be a good steward of money for taxpayers statewide. Given the escalating trends in labor and commodity inflation, and factoring in risk, the deck arch option is the appropriate choice.

Moving forward, the community's ongoing participation in the design will be essential in creating a structure that is memorable and distinctive. ODOT will continue to engage Eugene-Springfield area residents to determine their preferences for design aesthetics such as guardrails and light fixtures. Where possible, the agency will incorporate community feedback.

At every phase of the Willamette River Bridge replacement—planning, design and construction—ODOT will proactively engage local residents. Community values are shaping a new generation of bridges. As the Willamette River Bridge project continues, we at ODOT look forward to hearing from people throughout the Eugene-Springfield area.