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The Toll Truth - Willamette Week

By ANDREA DAMEWOOD | Published September 24, 2013 Updated January 24

5-6 minutes

Drivers would flock to I-205 to avoid paying tolls for the Columbia River Crossing.

Only about half as many cars would use the [Columbia River Crossing](#) as Oregon officials have previously claimed, and far more vehicles would choke the Interstate 205 Bridge as drivers dodged tolls on the CRC, according to an analysis by Portland economist Joe Cortright.

The news—reported [Monday on wweek.com](#)—drills yet another hole in the underlying argument for the \$2.8 billion megaproject to bring light rail to Vancouver, rebuild I-5's spans across the Columbia River, and expand highway interchanges in both Oregon and Washington.

Gov. John Kitzhaber and other CRC backers have long claimed that the existing Interstate Bridge can no longer meet the demands of commuters and truckers.

Analysis by their own consultants calls into question how the state would cover the costs if too few drivers paid the tolls to

cross the bridge.

Records released to Cortright in response to a public records request show state officials have known for months about the new tolling numbers and failed to share them with lawmakers and the public.

CRC officials have shown a pattern of nondisclosure that's starting to frustrate even allies of the project, especially since Kitzhaber now claims Oregon can build the bridge without money from Washington state—a stark reversal of his position only a few months ago.

Kitzhaber is preparing to ask legislators to extend the deadline for CRC funding in a special session scheduled for Sept. 30. The project's authorization expires that same day.

State Rep. Julie Parrish (R-West Linn) voted in favor of funding a bi-state CRC in February. Now she says she'll turn down an Oregon-only project should it come up for a vote during the special session.

"I just don't see how the governor has much credibility on this issue anymore," Parrish says.

CRC officials have hidden big problems with the project before, including the fact that the I-5 spans were designed too low for a lot of Columbia River ship traffic.

Cortright uncovered projections by [CDM Smith](#)—the company the CRC hired to perform an investment-grade analysis on tolling—that show the new Interstate Bridge would see about 78,400 daily trips, far fewer than the more than 160,000 cars projected earlier.

The numbers, given as estimated daily vehicle trips, also project I-205's Glenn Jackson Bridge would have to carry 2½ times as many cars as predicted earlier.

Cortright discovered the figures in a March 3, 2013, email from a CDM Smith employee to project officials.

Former state Rep. Katie Eyre (R-Hillsboro)—who lost her seat in the House after mounting outspoken opposition to the CRC—says that means Kitzhaber probably knew about the numbers when he signed the bill March 12 committing Oregon to \$450 million in funding for the project.

"If it doesn't hang with Kitzhaber," says Eyre, a certified public accountant, "I don't know where it hangs."

"The governor continues to work with the Legislature and treasurer to conduct a thorough, timely and transparent review of replacing the Interstate 5 Bridge with an Oregon-led project that takes seriously our fiduciary responsibility to Oregon taxpayers," Kitzhaber spokesman Tim Raphael tells *WW* by email. "That work is not yet complete, and no decision has been made about next steps."

But critics say Kitzhaber has long ignored a basic fact: Many drivers will avoid CRC tolls by diverting their vehicles onto I-205.

"What the CDM Smith study shows is perfectly in line with what you would expect," says Clark Williams-Derry, a project manager with the [Sightline Institute](#), an environmental think tank based in Seattle. "But we haven't heard about this stuff from anywhere inside the CRC; we don't see it in the public discussion. It's the elephant in the room that no one is willing to talk about."

Williams-Derry—who correctly predicted tolling and traffic shortfalls for similar Seattle-area projects, including the Highway 520 bridge—says megaprojects "develop their own internal logic."

Their supporters too often ignore or squirrel away inconvenient facts, he adds, in the name of pushing a project forward.

"This is billions of dollars they're gambling with," Williams-Derry says. "If you have such a great project, why do you have to hide so much?"