

The Register-Guard

EDITORIAL: More than a bridge

The state enlists the community's design help

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The Oregon Department of Transportation knows how to build bridges. That's a good thing — except when the agency's confidence in its own expertise leads it to greet suggestions from others as challenges to its competence or as meddling by unqualified outsiders. It's encouraging to see the state's continued efforts to resist this tendency toward institutional arrogance in the design of a new Interstate 5 bridge over the Willamette River. The result should be a span that goes as far as possible toward being worthy of its setting.

The department enlisted community participation from the beginning of the project. Constraints soon became apparent. The state has \$150 million to spend on a new bridge. When members of the public and a citizens' advisory group indicated a preference for a span that eventually was found to cost more than that, the agency selected the second-most popular design.

The choice left some bruised feelings — it would have been better to avoid presenting the public with an option that was beyond financial reach. Yet the public's No. 2 choice, a below-deck arch bridge, will be superior to the lowest-cost option, a concrete box girder structure similar to what's in place now.

The bridge, however, will be only a part of the project, which will include approaches at both ends, the areas underneath the bridge, land on either side of the structure and the Willamette River itself. Such elements as sound barriers, plantings and signs will have powerful effects on the aesthetics and function of the bridge — both for people driving across it and for people passing beneath it on Franklin Boulevard, on bicycle paths or on the river. The state, working with the local chapter of the American Institute of Architects, assembled architects, engineers, artists, landscape architects and others to come up with ideas for these ancillary elements. In two workshops, the agency asked the volunteers to think of ways of making the bridge and its surroundings appealing, cohesive, functional, safe and well-suited to the location.

State officials say the process was surprisingly fertile, yielding a variety of practical suggestions that transportation engineers would not have come up with on their own.

For instance, the department will need to install sound barriers to shield nearby areas from freeway noise. Since these structures must be built anyway, they might as well be distinctive — walls that echo the rocky geography of Judkins Point to the southwest of the bridge, or the undulating hills to the east.

The bridge's approaches will have to be marked with signs, but sculptural embellishments can ensure that they announce people's arrival in an out-of-the-ordinary place. A theme appropriate to the bridge's location at the head of the Willamette Valley, such as camas flowers, could be incorporated not only in plantings but also decoratively. Many of the ideas incorporate aesthetic virtue into functional necessities at minimal cost. State officials say the Eugene--Springfield area's deep pool of artistic and architectural talent contributed to the success of the effort, but that the principle of public involvement in design could be adapted to big transportation projects elsewhere in the state.

It may be that the I-5 bridge over the Willamette River will be distinctive not only in its own right, but will be the first of a new generation of projects that move people from one place to another while also giving them a sense of where they are.