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By Craig Murphy  
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Shovels, gravel and dirt were the name of the game at two groundbreaking ceremonies Tuesday in the Springfield area.

The first groundbreaking ceremony was for the I-5 Willamette River Bridge project, which will cross the river between Springfield and Eugene.

U.S. Senator Ron Wyden and U.S. Representative Peter DeFazio of Springfield joined Oregon Department of Transportation officials at the ceremony.

The backdrop for the ceremony was the temporary bridge erected three years ago, after a 2002 bridge inspection revealed growing cracks in the concrete beams.

"The Willamette Bridge project is the perfect example of the economic stimulus Oregon needs," Wyden said to a round of applause.

Dick Upton, project manager for ODOT, feels the bridge will be impressive once completed in the winter of 2012.

"We've done nothing short of something amazing with this project," Upton said. "Three of the four leading firms on this project are Oregon-grown firms. We'd like to think we're doing our part in getting Oregon back to work."

The area for Tuesday's ceremony, under the portion of Franklin Boulevard that crosses the Willamette, will see plenty of other changes with the project, including new bike trails.

Another area that will see significant change is Clearwater Park in southeast Springfield, where the Springfield Mill Race groundbreaking was held later Tuesday morning.

Wyden and DeFazio spoke at the Mill Race event as well, in addition to Springfield mayor Sid Leiken, Col. Steven Miles with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Greg James, president of the Willamalane Board. The groundbreaking marked the long-awaited start to the first of two phases for a project in the works for nearly 25 years.

James noted Clearwater Park will be completely renovated as part of the project, with work in the Willamette River itself being the main emphasis of the project. The second phase of the project is expected to be done next summer.

"This has got to be one of our most anticipated groundbreakings in Springfield for many, many years," Leiken said. "It is not just about the water, it's about the heritage of Springfield."

James, a Springfield native, noted a United Front effort between Willamalane, the city, the Congressional delegation and the U.S. Corps of Engineers allowed the project to finally get started.

"Willamalane is really proud to be a partner in this legacy project," James said. "This is a community treasure in the making."