



Bridging Oregon 43's 'red zone'

Commuting - Design options for cyclists, buses, boats and streetcars face some local resistance

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Rose Rummel-Eury commutes by bus and bike from her home in Lake Oswego to work in Portland. But unless traffic is jammed safely to a standstill on Oregon 43, she refuses to hop on her bicycle until a TriMet bus drops her off at the Sellwood Bridge.

"If you look at the bike route map of the region, you will notice that the stretch of Highway 43 between the Sellwood Bridge and Lake Oswego is a large red line," Rummel-Eury said. "That means you will die if you ride here."

The work of a committee just now rolling out design options for the congested route along the Willamette River could change that perception.

Alternatives include improving bus service on the highway, building a bicycle and pedestrian trail paralleling an existing rail line, starting regular streetcar service along the rail line and even running river taxis.

A "local preferred alternative" could be selected as early as this year, triggering the environmental assessments needed to apply for crucial federal financing.

A number of homeowners along the route are adamantly opposed to both streetcars and a bike path running immediately behind their residences. Although many say they don't want the noise of streetcars, they like even less the prospect of bikers and pedestrians having potential access to their backyards.

"I've heard from some people who are pretty agitated," said Brian Newman, the Metro Councilor who is co-chairing the study group. "They want it kept as a residential corridor."

The city of Lake Oswego, also a member of the group, is already on record supporting streetcar service between its emerging Foothills district along the Willamette and Portland's burgeoning South Riverfront district.

"The federal process we're involved in says you're supposed to look at everything before you make any recommendation, so I'm not supposed to say that streetcars are the answer," Mayor Judie Hammerstad said. "But from what I know today, streetcars are the

answer."

Adding or widening lanes to Oregon 43 doesn't appear viable, because of steep cliffs already taxed by the existing corridor and right-of-way considerations, she said. Similarly, lack of river access all but rules out using ferries to move commuters.

"Trains just have an appeal that buses don't have," she said. "They found that to be true in the Pearl District, and I think they would here, as well."

Cycling advocates don't oppose Lake Oswego's desire to maintain the rail line. But an accompanying bike/pedestrian trail would free countless motorists to get out of their cars and off the heavily traveled highway, they say.

A cycling path wouldn't be without challenges, primarily because the rail line's right of way shrinks to only 17 feet in width in the narrowest places. But with a little design creativity, potentially swinging the path out over the river in the tightest of spots, a bike path could easily be built, they add.

"We get calls all the time from people saying that riding on Highway 43 is far too dangerous," said Jessica Roberts, the Bicycle Transportation Alliance's metro-area advocate. "But with a dedicated bike path, they'd be happy to get on their bikes."

A two-year survey of metro cyclists listed Oregon 43 between the Sellwood Bridge and Lake Oswego as among the area's most dangerous riding routes, she said. Nearly 40,000 vehicles a day negotiate the highway's tight bends and blind curves, according to state Transportation Department statistics.

The study group met with the public for the first time Tuesday night and will do so again numerous times during the next several months, Metro's Newman said. Once a preferred alternative is chosen, the project could compete for federal financing with other projects capped at \$75 million.

And if streetcars don't make the final cut?

Laughing, Hammerstad said, "We'll burn that bridge when we get to it."

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