

CRC Tolls Will Produce Gridlock On I-205

Summary: Analysis of CDM Smith Traffic Forecast

Joseph Cortright, Impresa, Inc., September 2013

Tolling I-5 for the Columbia River Crossing will cause nearly 50,000 vehicles daily to shift to the I-205 Bridge, which will be jammed to capacity, according to a previously undisclosed traffic study prepared for the CRC.

Starting in 2016, the CRC will toll the existing I-5 bridges; but the parallel I-205 bridges will continue to be free. Tolls will create a strong incentive for drivers to divert to I-205. Until now, CRC has claimed that diversion will be minimal; but a new study prepared by a CRC consultant CDM Smith confirms that tens of thousands of cars will shift to I-205, ultimately loading it to full capacity. Traffic jams on I-205 will increase travel times on I-205, and on connecting routes like SR-14 and I-84; economically important trips to Portland Airport will likely take much longer as a result.

In 2016, CRC will toll the existing I-5 bridges at \$2.50 per peak hour vehicle, plus a \$1.50 surcharge for those who don't buy transponders.

Traffic on the I-205 bridge will rise from 140,000 vehicles per day today, to more than 188,000 vehicles in 2016.

Meanwhile, tolls will cause a huge drop in traffic on I-5. In 2016, traffic will drop to just 78,400 vehicles from 124,000 vehicles today.

In 2022, when the new bridge opens, tolls will be raised to \$3.62 (peak hour) plus a \$1.77 surcharge for those without transponders. Traffic diversion will worsen: Traffic on the new I-5 bridges will fall to just 78,200 vehicles per day--about the same level as 1972. After spending more than \$3 billion, the new mega-bridge will serve fewer than two-thirds as many motorists as use it today.

Shortly after the new bridge opens in 2022, diverted traffic will jam I-205 to its capacity of about 210,000 vehicles per day (50% more than it carries now). The forecast effectively counts on I-205 traffic jams to force drivers to use the tolled I-5 bridge.

These data are from a set of traffic projections prepared by CRC consultant CDM Smith, and obtained via a public records request. Figures shown here correspond to the consultant's baseline "Scenario 2" forecast. Its Scenario 1 forecast shows even lower traffic on I-5.

These estimates show that the traffic forecasts contained in the CRC are—as critics have claimed—drastically overstated. CDM Smith forecasts that I-5 traffic on the new bridge will be less than 100,000 vehicles per day in 2030—barely half the 178,000 forecast in the project's EIS.

The CDM Smith report leaves important questions about the CRC unanswered:

- How with only half the tolled traffic anticipated in the FEIS financial plan, is the CRC projected to generate at least as much—or more—toll revenue?
- Why is it reasonable to project that after declining for a decade, traffic growth across the Columbia will accelerate to 1.1% for the next 20 years?
- Why, after being commissioned (and paid) to undertake a customized, local travel survey, did CDM Smith calibrate its model with a value of time estimate computed with secondary data and a "rule of thumb?"