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Political Infighting Escalates as Oregon Looks to Save the I-5 Columbia River Crossing Project

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By Kate Holder

On Saturday, February 1, [The \(Portland\) Oregonian](http://www.oregonlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2014/02/columbia_river_crossing_faces_2.html) (http://www.oregonlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2014/02/columbia_river_crossing_faces_2.html) newspaper reported on the escalation of political infighting between Oregon's Democratic governor and its Democratically controlled state senate over efforts to save the troubled [I-5 Columbia River Crossing \(CRC\) project](http://www.columbiarivercrossing.org) (<http://www.columbiarivercrossing.org>).

According to the newspaper, Gov. John Kitzhaber told lawmakers that he would scuttle the project if reauthorization of Oregon's \$450 million contribution to the CRC wasn't approved during the 35-day legislative session that begins this week.

Democratic State Senate President Peter Courtney, however, responded to the Governor's pressure by calling on the State of Washington to return to the two-state strategy of partnering with Oregon to fund and rebuild the I-5 bridge.

The only problem? Washington lawmakers, driven by strong Tea Party-based opposition, pulled out of the CRC project last summer and there are no signs that that will change.

Courtney's overture to Olympia reflects growing concerns within Oregon's state senate that going alone on the CRC may not be feasible.

[TRN has previously reported](http://tollroadsnews.com/./news/i-5-columbia-river-crossing-wa-or-project-stumbles-on---now-hit-by-big-cdm-smith-diversion-estimates) (<http://tollroadsnews.com/./news/i-5-columbia-river-crossing-wa-or-project-stumbles-on---now-hit-by-big-cdm-smith-diversion-estimates>) on the existential threat to the \$2.5 billion CRC project after Washington state withdrew its support. In its October 2013 story, TRN also reported that preliminary data released from contractor CDM Smith showed not only lower traffic forecasts for the I-5 bridge but also claimed a huge diversion of traffic to the un-tolled I-205 bridge located about 7 miles upriver.

The Oregonian story reported that, in its “investment grade analysis” report released this past December, CDM Smith’s “conservative” analysis said that the I-205 bridge would get 40,000 additional daily trips from drivers looking to avoid tolls on the I-5.

Traffic diversion is just one of several issues dividing Oregon Democrats over the increasingly troubled I-5 CRC project.

Oregon’s go-it-alone approach means incurring the added risk of having to issue all of the debt to fund the now \$2.8 billion project and bear the full burden of possible cost overruns.

Eminent domain and toll enforcement issues also raise important concerns in building and operating a bridge in which two-thirds of its traffic (and toll revenue) is projected to come from Washington state drivers, according to the newspaper.

Oregon’s Democratic House Speaker Tina Kotek backs the Governor’s desire to save the project and will press for reauthorization despite concerns within her chamber.

Indeed, two realities are keeping the I-5 CRC project alive, if barely.

One is the fact that U.S. Senator Patty Murray, D-Washington, with backing from President Obama, considers the I-5 CRC a priority and claims to be able to deliver on the promise of \$850 million in U.S. Highway Administration money for the project. This despite the fact that those funds require the light-rail component of the project that drew the most fire from Washington state and largely drove its withdrawal.

Two, the existing bridge carrying I-5 between Portland, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington -- which is actually a pair of old, through-truss lift bridges -- is “still an unsafe and inadequate bridge that needs to be fixed,” according to Oregon House Representative Tobias Read, D-Beaverton, who was quoted by the newspaper.

What does the motoring public think about CRC? As of this morning, *The Oregonian* article still ranks third on the list of most-commented-on-stories at [OregonLive \(http://www.oregonlive.com/#most-comments\)](http://www.oregonlive.com/#most-comments), the newspaper’s web site affiliate.