

8-26-1988

Background Report – The Eastbank Freeway: A Review of the Issues

City Club of Portland (Portland, Or.)

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Recommended Citation

City Club of Portland (Portland, Or.), "Background Report – The Eastbank Freeway: A Review of the Issues" (1988). *City Club of Portland*. 431.

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Background Report

The Eastbank Freeway: A Review of the Issues

During the 70's, Portland actively supported the revitalization of the Central Eastside Industrial Area. Working with the Oregon Dept. of Transportation (ODOT) in the 80's, the city developed a plan to obtain funding for the East Marquam Project, which would add to and modify existing I-5 ramps to the industrial and commercial areas on the east bank of the Willamette River.

With development of the Central City Plan, the importance of a lively near Eastside business community was re-affirmed. Increased public use of the waterfront was also identified as an important objective. In its own "A Vision for the Central City," the City Club pictured the development of the Willamette River as a working river and an attraction for residential, commercial, retail, service, and recreational uses on both its banks. In a later report, the Club recommended that a cost/benefit study be conducted on the Eastside with consideration of a wide range of new alignments for the Eastbank Freeway away from the riverfront.

Early in 1988, with the investment of \$100,000 in city and state funds, the Eastside Options Steering Committee was formed, chaired by state Sen. Jane Cease, to examine alternate locations for this section of the I-5 freeway. Overall planning for the Eastbank freeway was intended to follow a dual-track process, with the East Marquam Project forming one track. The final recommendation of the Steering Committee would represent a possible second track. Cease served as a non-voting chair; two members represented the Central Eastside Industrial Council; two members represented Riverfront for People; and one each represented the planning Commission, Southeast Uplift, and the Advisory Committee on Design and Construction of the Convention Center.

The Steering Committee published its report on June 27. Leading up to that report, project consultants had presented three alternate plans, all varying in their impact on transportation, land use, and industrial/commercial activity. The Committee recommendation favored the general alignment of Alternative Two, which lies between S.E. First and Water avenues and would create about 21 acres of riverfront land.

In preparation for the Planning Commission's July 26 hearing on the issue, the Portland Office of Transportation recommended that the second track should instead be the "ODOT Modified Alternative," a recently developed variation of ODOT's East Marquam Project. This new plan would re-align eastward the curve of the freeway between the Marquam and Morrison bridges and open up about 8 acres of riverfront land. This proposal had been submitted to the Steering Committee at its last meeting but was not acted upon. The Planning Commission adopted the Cease Committee report and recommended that the City Council fund an independent analysis of Alternative Two. These issues will go before the City Council on September 7.

Funding for either alternative will depend on timing as well as the extent of relocation and construction. Proponents of the various plans must contemplate raising up to \$94 million, depending on which option is selected and the start date. The \$54 million already committed to the East Marquam Project cannot be used for freeway demolition or relocation, only construction of new ramps. To use the federal funds committed to that Project, contracts must be let in 1989 and the last phase of construction must begin no later than 1991.

Advocates of each option must juggle vision with practicality. Are there issues not yet adequately raised in public debate which should be part of the suggested independent study? Which option makes the Eastside waterfront more publicly accessible? Which plan enhances the vitality of the Central Eastside Industrial District the most? Which provides the largest number of needed transportation improvements? Do the alternatives match the funding options? Do recommendations respond to the vision for Portland which has been articulated by its citizens and elaborated by City Club research in '86 and '87?