

COLUMBIA RIVER CROSSING COALITION

CASE STUDY



July 21, 2008

Choked roadways kill redevelopment projects, entire district

A well-orchestrated effort by the city of Vancouver to make its downtown attractive to young families, empty nesters, retailers, restaurants and service providers is succeeding.

The success is especially noteworthy because it is part of the antidote to far-flung, auto-dependent development. The transformation is happening in part because of developers willing to take a long-term view. And the future of downtown Vancouver is uncertain.

Accessibility to the district depends in large part upon the portion of Interstate 5 that crosses the Columbia River.

Because downtown is hemmed in on four sides — historic single-family neighborhoods to the north, the interstate and Central Park to the east and the Columbia River to the south and west — it is only as viable as the limited number of roadways serving it.

When congestion on the segment of I-5 along downtown Vancouver is at its very worst, gridlock paralyzes the district.

“If the few thoroughways that we do have get clogged because the problems with the current I-5 bridge don’t get addressed in as timely a fashion as possible, the downtown very likely will stagnate,” said Steve Burdick, former director of economic development for the city of Vancouver.

Burdick recently went to work as director of development for Killian Pacific LLC, one of a number of developers that are taking part in the downtown revitalization.

The company owns parcels in and around downtown. Most of the properties are directly impacted by what happens with the Interstate 5 crossing.

One such site is less than a mile north of where Interstate 5 crosses the Columbia River. The land, abutting the interstate, is slated for a new main library and additional space to house office, restaurants, retail, residential and possibly a luxury hotel.

A little farther north and west, the company controls property pegged to be bisected by a light rail line, key in a frontrunner concept for a new I-5 crossing.

Success of another project by Killian Pacific is at the mercy of the flow of traffic across the I-5 bridge. Barely a mile north of the Columbia River and a few miles east of I-5, Grand Central opened this spring. It is anchored by a Fred Meyer store and another dozen or so retailers, service providers and restaurants.

Clearly, Killian Pacific has reason to be supportive of construction of a new Interstate 5 crossing. But Burdick says the company's support for a new bridge is not self-serving.

"The issue is much larger than Killian Pacific. As a country, we are facing a serious need for more efficient urban centers, where mass transit is readily available, where people don't have to get in a car every time they need to go somewhere," he said.

Maximizing the potential of downtown Vancouver — a 10- minute trip from downtown Portland when there is no traffic congestion — holds opportunity for the entire metro area.

As recent as a decade ago, downtown Vancouver seemed hopeless, a victim of flight to suburbia and its indoor malls that began in the 1960s.

"It essentially was abandoned. Property values deteriorated and crime increased. Parks were not family places. There was tremendous existing infrastructure — parks, sidewalks, streets, a sewer system and other utilities — none of which was being utilized anywhere near capacity," said Burdick.

Today the district has more residents than it has had in decades. Restaurants, retailers and service providers draw additional people. Esther Short Park, with its fountains, rose garden, playground and other features, attracts crowds daily.

Hundreds of millions of dollars have been invested in the form of real estate improvements. And still in planning stages are additional redevelopment projects that could double the level of investment.

The most substantial piece of the revitalization puzzle, however, likely will be a new I-5 crossing over the Columbia.

"To say that much of downtown Vancouver hangs in the balance would not be a stretch," Burdick said.