

Polk County Itemizer-Observer
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County connects with public on bridge ideas

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By **Erin Zysett**

POLK COUNTY -- Aaron Geisler, Polk County public works director, estimates that in 23 years traffic over the Willamette River at the Marion and Center street bridges will become impossible if another bridge isn't built.

"We are already nearly at capacity. It's going to continue to grow so much that by 2030 there will be one heck of a traffic snarl," Geisler said.

To keep the bridge crossing foremost in people's minds and to encourage more citizen involvement, the Polk County government has created an internet site called Project Bridge Watch. It is in conjunction with a City of Salem/Oregon Department of Transportation project called Salem River Cross.

Both campaigns, in addition to their web sites, are sponsoring public forums to get the populace involved.

"There is a lot of support and momentum for this project among the people of West Salem (where more than half the daily bridge traffic originates from), but elsewhere (in Salem and Polk County) it's not as much on their radar." Geisler said. "But this is an issue that affects everyone in the area," Geisler said.

According to planners, the project is only in the "range of alternatives" stage. That means they are looking at every alternative and taking every public comment. Nothing is being ruled out yet.

The Bridge Watch Project is aimed at drawing as many of those comments as possible.

"The more people we hear from the better our final decisions will be," Geisler said. "That's why we have a section on the web site called 'Ask the bridge guys.' Where we decide to place this bridge will affect traffic flow, future planning, businesses and neighborhoods. We need to hear citizen's concerns - it's part of doing our homework," he added.

A lot of public interest was generated last year when a mentally disturbed man threatening suicide halted all traffic on the Marion and Center street bridges, effectively shutting down much of Salem and Polk County for hours.

Other traffic incidents have caused spikes in community participation and support for a new bridge, but it invariably has waned. Government officials, particularly West Salem representatives, are determined to follow through this time.

The web sites, poster contests and public meetings are a means to that end.

"We have to have a new bridge. It's that simple. Where we put it, now that is still up in the air," Geisler said.

For more information, background and updates: Project Bridge Watch at www.bridgewatch.net, or Salem River Crossing at www.salemrivercrossing.org.

The next public open house will be scheduled in June.