



## Multnomah County's vehicle fee plan dropped from May ballot

*Commissioners have harsh words for cities as they look for money to replace Sellwood Bridge*

BY STEVE LAW

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**Multnomah County commissioners decided Tuesday against putting a local vehicle registration fee for bridge repairs on the May 20 primary election ballot.**

County Chairman Ted Wheeler said it was unwise to proceed because Gresham, Troutdale and Maywood Park opposed the bridge-funding plan and would demand a share of the fee proceeds be diverted to their jurisdictions.

Wheeler had hoped county voters would approve a 20-year, \$24 annual vehicle registration fee providing local money to replace the Sellwood Bridge and repair other Willamette River bridges. The money would be used to match federal and other funds.

Commissioners Maria Rojo de Steffey and Lisa Naito objected Tuesday, saying they would prefer to put the fee on the ballot. March 11 is the deadline to place measures on the May 20 ballot.

Rojo de Steffey said the county should "cut some deals" with the three cities and continue without that share of the money.

"I would prefer to move forward even without unanimous support," Naito agreed.

But Wheeler, with the support of Commissioners Lonnie Roberts and Jeff Cogen, preferred to delay the ballot measure, providing more time to convince the three holdouts to support the proposal.

If the county lets Gresham, Troutdale and Maywood Park keep a share of the money, Wheeler said, then other local governments that previously agreed to the bridge-funding plan might seek to negotiate a similar deal.

"If we start negotiating with any one jurisdiction, all of the (other agreements) unravel," Wheeler said.

Even if they didn't, it would result in unequal treatment for residents, he said.

Wheeler said the importance of putting the measure on the May ballot may have lessened, because it appears that Congress might not dole out more bridge funds by 2009, as expected. That will buy the county more time to arrange local funds, which are essential to winning federal matching money.

"We are certainly not walking away from this," Wheeler said. "I see this as a reality that we're not ready to go to the ballot in May."

### 'I'm just outraged'

Creating a new county vehicle registration fee, as permitted by state law, didn't go over well in some jurisdictions in the east end of the county. Some city officials there wondered why they should fund a bridge that few of their residents use frequently. Wheeler said he heard an "it's not our problem" sentiment when he tried to sell the idea to some city leaders.

When Gresham was scheduled to take up the issue Feb. 19, five of the councilors spoke against the plan, said Karen Schilling, county planning manager. The issue flopped when Gresham city councilors declined to bring it up for a vote.

Some county commissioners had harsh words Tuesday for the three jurisdictions.

"Frankly, it's extremely provincial of them," Cogen said. "I have to say this is an extremely non-collaborative action on their part."

"I'm just outraged," Rojo de Steffey said.

cities. Cogen said he might be inclined to rethink the distribution of those funds.

Schilling told commissioners that the key regional group that decides transportation priorities, Metro's Joint Policy Advisory Committee on Transportation, recently agreed to take another look at a regional authority to fund bridge and other repairs.

Multnomah County commissioners clearly favor the idea, but none appeared optimistic that will occur.

"I have no faith, frankly, that there's going to be a regional transportation authority enacted in the near future," Rojo de Steffey said.

That has been talked about for 20 years with no results, she said.

If the Sellwood Bridge fails and people die, the county will be blamed, Rojo de Steffey said. "We have a dire need with that bridge. It's dangerous. I wouldn't drive over it, frankly."

County officials say the bridge is safe and inspected frequently, but they have lowered weight limits to deny access to large trucks and buses.

A \$5 million study will continue looking at possible designs for the bridge. Commissioners also might lobby the 2009 Legislature to amend the state's local vehicle registration fee law so the county wouldn't have to seek approval from each city simply to put a measure before voters.

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