

A Mission Street Retrospective

Background

As a state capitol, Salem was entitled to a freeway spur from I-5 into the city proper. This freeway spur would have been called I-305.

In the mid 70's, the Federal Highway Administration denied a request that I-305 include a bridge over the Willamette and connect to Hwy 22. Salem and its regional partners determined that if they couldn't get the bridge, then they didn't need the freeway spur. The region took advantage of a program that allowed them to transfer the federal money allocated for the I-305 freeway spur to other locally needed projects. The transferred money was used to pay for building the Salem Parkway, widening the Marion Street Bridge, widening North River Road, widening South Commercial Street, and widening Mission Street.

At about the same time, an inspection of the Center Street Bridge revealed significant scouring damage to the bridge piers. The Center Street Bridge needed to be replaced and qualified for special federal funding. In order to maintain traffic across the river during construction, the Marion Street Bridge was widened and served two-way traffic until the Center Street Bridge was completed. At the time, ODOT only wanted to build 3 lanes in each direction, Salem wanted 4 lanes. The resulting bridges addressed the then current need for expanded traffic capacity across the river and the consideration of a new bridge at Pine Street was put on the back burner.

Widening Mission Street between 12th and 25th Streets and constructing an overpass over the railroad was the last in a series of projects designed to effectively move traffic to the Marion and Center Street bridges.

What was Mission Street like back then?

In 1979 there were 32 trains per day using the tracks through the middle of town. There was only one grade separated crossing of the railroad – at Portland Road, 2.5 miles to the north.

Mission Street, a primary gateway to the City of Salem, was two lanes wide. For the most part it had no curbs, no gutters, no paved shoulders, no sidewalks, no bike lanes, and no street trees.

It did have traffic – 16,000 vehicles per day. Now the traffic volume is more than double, at 35,000.

It also had traffic accidents. In 1979, there were 285 traffic accidents between 12th and 25th Streets. That is an average of one accident per day Monday thru Friday, all year long, with a few left over for the weekends. I'm glad to report that in 2011 there were only 55 traffic accidents reported in the same area, and that none of them involved bicycles or pedestrians.

All of the intersections in the corridor were forecast to operate at a level of service "F" by the year 2000.

What was the area around Mission Street like?

Although there were and are numerous single family homes along and near the Mission Street Corridor, the Comprehensive Plan designation (then and now) for the area is for multi-family

residential, industrial, and commercial uses. It was noted at the time that the lack of both public and private investment in the corridor area had been influenced by the discussion of widening Mission Street that had occurred for so many years.

The Mission Street corridor was determined to be part of an historic neighborhood of workingman's residences of the late 19th and early 20th century. Many of the buildings had been neglected and in a state of disrepair. Less than 8% of the structures surveyed showed evidence that the owners were maintaining them.

Housing along the corridor was a mix of single family homes, apartments, and mobile homes. There was a vacancy rate of 18%. Eighty percent of the units were rentals. Seventy Percent of the households displaced had been victimized by crime.

The project displaced 113 people in 54 residential units and 92 employees from 19 commercial and industrial uses. When purchasing right-of-way for the project, it was necessary to make sure the residents were fairly compensated and could find comparable safe and sanitary housing. In at least one case, it was determined that no comparable unit could meet the test of being safe and sanitary, so the residents were relocated to better housing and a "trust fund" was set up to help with the rent.

All Mission Street alternatives purposefully avoided impacts to a cannery, only to have it go out of business prior to construction. The cannery owners consolidated their operations in another state. It was eventually replaced with Tokyo University. So in this case the neighborhood changed – and would have even without the project.

How Decisions Were Made

Like you, the City Council at the time was provided with a variety of alternatives. These designs crossed the railroad and connected to 12th and 13th Streets in different ways and with different pros and cons.

The alternatives ranged from a "simple" overpass crossing of the railroad with no directional ramps to a set of Hines Street Alternatives.

The Council combined design elements of different alternatives to create the preferred or selected alternative. Things they considered included:

1. Mission Street was already a barrier and divided the neighborhood. Was there a way to minimize the barrier effect? They found that the Hines Street routing would be a worse barrier. The Council asked for the Mission Street alignment to be shifted to avoid isolating some existing housing from the rest of the neighborhood.
2. The Council also shifted the alignment to the north, thus reducing the number of housing units displaced and providing for improved local circulation and neighborhood connectivity to the south.
3. The Council specifically added the directional ramps to the Selected Alternative in order to improve traffic flow to Pringle Parkway (and the bridges) and to de-emphasize the use of Mission Street adjacent to Bush Park and protect the associated Historic Neighborhood. There had been earlier proposals for a Mission Street freeway and

bridge over the Willamette and the Council wished to reduce the likelihood of that ever occurring.

4. The Council was concerned about the aesthetic impacts of the elevated ramps on the surrounding area – especially the historic Deepwood and Webster Houses. Artistic renderings were produced so they could better visualize the impacts and they determined them to be acceptable.
5. The Selected Alternative allowed Mission Street to remain open to traffic during construction.
6. The Selected Alternative minimized potential conflicts between motor vehicles and pedestrians and bicycles. This was not a “given” when the project design was started as the treatment of bikes and pedestrians was evolving at the time.
7. The most controversial aspect of the project was the proposed extension of 17th Street to connect to Mission Street. The City conducted an independent study of the connection and its impacts on the neighborhood. The connection was included in the Selected Alternative.

What can be learned?

The Mission Street project reduced traffic congestion, improved safety, and (in my opinion) helped stabilize and improve the neighborhood. There were clearly trade-offs. The Council made judgment calls.

You are faced with similar design, function, and neighborhood issues. While the current situation isn't identical, there are some things we can learn from Mission Street:

1. The Council had a vision. In the current situation, is a local purpose bridge or a regional connector the best fit for Salem? What about the no-build option – is that the 30 year vision of the Council?
2. The Council had goals of what to achieve and what to protect. The Council clearly identified what was unacceptable. In this case, are the impacts and potential relocations acceptable? If not, what impacts are most unacceptable and how can future design steps mitigate them (or can they)?
3. Stimulus for Change. Land use opportunities could emerge after construction of the bridge. Will a new bridge open up opportunities along Front St and the Willamette River? Could the City work with the local neighborhoods to assure that this project is a positive asset for them, as well as to the community at large?

Addressing all of these questions is probably outside the scope of the EIS, but are certainly things the City can be looking at on a separate track.

Conclusion

I hope this little trip down memory lane was useful and will help you in your deliberations.