

QuickPoint! - Is a New, Earthquake-Ready Burnside Bridge Necessary?

By **Ethan Rohrbach**

For the past 40 years, the scientific community has been aware that a major earthquake caused by the Cascadia subduction zone could strike the Pacific Northwest. Enter Multnomah County's \$895 million "Earthquake Ready Burnside Bridge," set to open in 2031. County Commissioners decided that replacing the current bridge is necessary to safeguard Portland's lifeline routes. But how necessary or helpful will a new bridge really be?

Even though the new bridge will be the same width as the old bridge, pedestrian and bus lanes will be widened in exchange for one fewer Eastbound car lane. City planners think this will discourage car ridership, and therefore auto emissions. Plans assume that peak-hour bike traffic will increase by more than 450% and that a third of car drivers will become bicyclists. These expectations are unrealistic.

There were other less expensive options besides building a new Burnside Bridge. For example, Tilikum Crossing might be used under emergency circumstances because it is wide, seismically resilient, and could be cleared quickly for cars.

Ultimately, the rationale for the new Burnside Bridge is the assumption that it would withstand a major earthquake in the near future. In reality, there is no way to know when the next earthquake will occur, how strong it would be, or how many of Portland's bridges would remain functioning. The Burnside Bridge plan seems more like a coercive tactic to reduce automobile travel by constraining road capacity on a major Portland bridge.

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