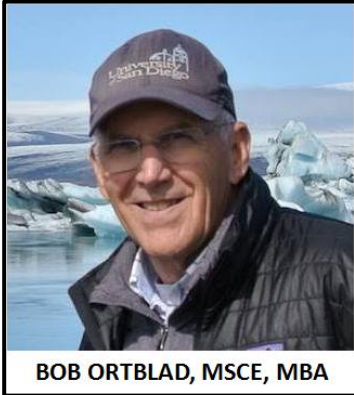




**A Neighbors For A Better Crossing News Alert Dated 4-17-2025**

## **Expert Warns Interstate Bridge Replacement Tolls Could Reach \$20**

***Neighbors for a Better Crossing is advocating for a Cost-Effective Redesign***



**BOB ORTLAD, MSCE, MBA**

Bob Ortblad, MSCE, MBA, a civil engineering and business expert, has raised concerns about the cost for tolls on the Interstate Bridge. [The Interstate Bridge Replacement \(IBR\) program's 2023 Financial Plan and analysis](#) suggested toll could range from \$1.50 to \$3.55 per crossing, depending on funding scenarios and project costs. Ortblad argues that this estimate significantly understates the potential toll costs, which could climb to as high as \$20 per crossing due to escalating project expenses and funding shortfalls. [Letter: 'The IBR needs a more cost-effective design'](#)

"The Interstate Bridge Replacement (IBR) program's financial projections are overly optimistic and fail to account for a looming \$1 billion shortfall," said Ortblad. "With costs likely to hit \$9.4 billion by 2025 and limited state and federal funding, tolls could soar to an unsustainable \$20 per crossing, placing a heavy burden on commuters."

The IBR's 2023 Financial Plan estimates \$6.5 billion in available funds against a projected \$7.5 billion in costs, leaving a \$1 billion deficit. Ortblad notes that a hoped-for \$1 billion Federal Transit Administration grant is unlikely due to low ridership projections, impractical station designs, and freeway-adjacent park-and-ride facilities that encourage urban sprawl. To bridge the gap, the [Washington Legislature has proposed \\$2.5 billion in toll bonds](#)—a \$1.3 billion increase over the IBR's original plan.

Compounding the issue, the IBR's last cost estimate from 2022 is outdated, with a new estimate due in July 2025. Ortblad predicts that recent tariffs and cost escalations will inflate the project's price tag by at least 25%, pushing total costs to approximately \$9.4 billion. With both Washington and Oregon facing transportation budget constraints and little prospect of additional federal support, tolls may need to cover up to \$5 billion of the project's cost.

Ortblad advocates for a more affordable and sustainable approach. "The IBR's current plan to widen five miles of freeway, reconstruct five interchanges, and build oversized bridge approaches is unnecessarily expensive," he said. "A smarter solution is to preserve the existing six-lane bridges and construct a four- or six-lane immersed tunnel. This would cut costs significantly while delivering environmental and safety benefits."

Ortblad urges policymakers to rethink the IBR's design to protect commuters from exorbitant tolls and ensure a financially viable project. "We need a plan that balances fiscal responsibility with the region's long-term needs," he concluded.

**About Bob Ortblad:** Bob Ortblad, MSCE, MBA, retired P.E., CPA with extensive experience analyzing infrastructure projects. His insights focus on cost-effective and sustainable solutions for transportation challenges. Follow on X: @BOrtblad

**About [Neighbors for a Better Crossing](#):** a grassroots coalition of concerned residents and businesses from Oregon and Washington, united in advocating for an Immersed Tube Tunnel—an innovative solution that will save billions in taxpayer dollars, eliminate the need for tolls, safeguard the Columbia River's delicate ecosystem and marine life, and preserve the historic I-5 Bridge as a car-free gateway for tourism, pedestrians and cyclists between Oregon and Washington. Follow on X: [@N4BetterXing](#)

## **Background information:**

### **Drilling Cost Overruns: A Looming Financial Disaster**

The IBR's proposed 100+ drill shafts for bridge pilings present a severe cost risk. The Abernethy Bridge project on I-205, which required only 12 drill shafts, has already caused multi-year delays and cost overruns soaring from \$248 million to nearly \$1 billion. This was due to encountering difficult bedrock and large boulders—the same geological conditions identified in the Columbia River Crossing's (CRC) [2013 test drilling under the Interstate Bridge](#).

Each drill shaft costs between \$2.5 million and \$3 million and takes approximately one month to complete, adding at least \$300 million to the IBR's estimated \$6–\$7.5 billion budget. With delays and additional challenges, total costs could exceed \$9 billion. Oregon and Washington taxpayers will each bear at least \$2 billion in bond debt—before inevitable cost increases drive tolls and debt even higher. Shockingly, this critical drill shaft issue was omitted from the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) despite IBR officials being aware of it since May 2024. [Letter: IBR's billion-dollar risk, another Abernethy Bridge financial disaster?](#)

### **Tolls Will Harm Businesses & Communities**

Tolls on I-5, set to begin in early 2026, will cost the average commuter approximately \$2,350 per year, placing an undue financial burden on residents, businesses, and commercial transportation. These costs will be passed down to consumers, increasing prices across both states. Furthermore, toll avoidance will push more drivers to I-205, worsening congestion and harming businesses along the I-5 corridor from Tualatin to Salmon Creek.

Community and business groups—including the [Hayden Island Neighborhood Network](#), the [Hayden Island Community Safety Initiative](#), the [Just Crossing Alliance & Endorsing Partners](#), and our own [Neighbors For A Better Crossing](#)—have major concerns with a toll on I-5. Efforts to block or regulate tolling are already underway:

- **Oregon:** The [Vote Before Tolls Initiative](#) seeks to give Oregonians the right to vote on toll implementation before it takes effect.
- **Washington:** Representative John Ley has introduced [HB 1559: No Tolls on the Interstate Bridge](#) to prohibit tolling on this vital transportation route.

Currently, there are no tolls on I-5 between Mexico and Canada. Implementing them here would create a financial hardship for residents and businesses, with no real congestion relief in return.

### **The Mega Bridge: High Cost, Minimal Benefit**

For a potential \$9 billion price tag, the proposed bridge provides only one additional lane per direction—offering little relief for congestion. Additionally, its steep bike and pedestrian ramps, transit stations 30 feet above Hayden Island and 100 feet above Vancouver, and reliance on elevators vulnerable to outages make it far from user-friendly.

Worse, the new bridge's vessel clearance will be reduced from 178 feet to 116 feet, restricting commercial river traffic that supports businesses upstream (*see the attached 2023 U.S. Coast Guard rejection letter and their recommendation for a tunnel alternative*).

## A Smarter Solution: The Immersed Tube Tunnel (ITT)

Instead of an overpriced mega bridge, Oregon and Washington should pursue an [Immersed Tube Tunnel \(ITT\)](#)—a proven alternative used worldwide, including the \$3 billion [Fraser River Tunnel project underway in Vancouver, BC](#).

An Immersed Tube Tunnel offers numerous advantages:

- ✓ **More cost-effective** – Avoids drill shaft cost overruns and saves billions.
- ✓ **Potential for toll-free travel** – Cost savings could eliminate the need for tolls.
- ✓ **Earthquake-resilient** – Far safer than a tall bridge in the event of a [Cascadia Seduction Zone](#) earthquake (37% probability of a 7.1+ magnitude quake within 50 years).
- ✓ **Easily expandable** – Unlike a bridge, additional tunnel tubes can be added to accommodate future traffic growth.
- ✓ **Environmentally friendly** – No in-river pilings, and hazardous waste from demolition, minimizing harm to fish habitats.
- ✓ **Faster construction** – ITTs are prefabricated off-site, floated into position, and installed quickly—cutting build time in half compared to a bridge.
- ✓ **Preserves the Historic I-5 Bridge** – The existing bridge, recognized on the [National Register of Historic Places](#), has over 70 years of remaining service life. It can be repurposed as a pedestrian, bike, and transit corridor, generating revenue through public events and tourism rather than being demolished.

### Call to Action: Demand an Independent Tunnel Review

The IBR project has remained biased in favor of a bridge, despite its own 2020 engineering study confirming an Immersed Tube Tunnel is a viable alternative. With Oregon and Washington financial resources already strained and the uncertainty of Federal DOT funding under the Trump Administration, has the IBR already put its entire project at risk? Given the immense financial, environmental, and transportation benefits, **we are urging legislators to convene an independent commission to evaluate the ITT alternative before locking taxpayers into a \$9 billion+ financial disaster**. Our organization is sponsoring public meetings to hear from tunnel experts. It's time to get the facts and cost estimates for an immersed tube tunnel!

The destruction of our historic I-5 Bridge and the construction of an unsightly, over-budget mega bridge is not the legacy Oregon and Washington should leave behind. By preserving our existing bridge and embracing smarter solutions, we can create a landmark—not a landfill.



[www.neighbors4a-bettercrossing.org](http://www.neighbors4a-bettercrossing.org)