

# In Our View: Leavitt Policy Shifts

## His latest idea about bridge tolls contradicts the user-fee principle

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The apparent evolution of Vancouver Mayor-elect Tim Leavitt's bridge toll policy has all the earmarks of political expediency.

On July 13, Leavitt told the local council of the League of United Latin American Citizens, shortly before winning its endorsement: "No tolls, absolutely not. Tolls simply have too much of an impact."

Two days later, when pressed repeatedly for an answer at a meeting with The Columbian's editorial board, Leavitt said he would accept tolls as a last resort for funding a new Interstate 5 Bridge.

On Friday, less than a month after winning the mayoral election with a vigorous anti-toll campaigning strategy, Leavitt presented a tolling plan. Granted, it would exempt his constituents because, as he told The Columbian's Erik Robinson, "I'm trying to represent the businesses and commuters for the city of Vancouver. To the extent I can fight for relief from tolling, that's what my job is."

Good luck in that crusade. Leavitt won't be the only politician begging for toll relief. With his evolving policy, Leavitt puts himself between a rock and a toll place. He said something goofy in order to get elected: He supported the bridge but not tolls. No one who knows anything about the specifics of bridge financing believed him. Obviously, a number of voters did. Now he has to figure out how to save face as he only digs the hole deeper. There really is no way out for him.

We'd love for him to slap his forehead and ask, "What the heck was I thinking?" But don't count on it.

Before advancing next month from city councilor to mayor, Leavitt should ponder this reality: Columbia River Crossing research reveals that two-thirds to three-fourths of 135,000 motorists who use the bridge daily enter or exit the freeway (or both) within a few miles of the river. To exempt the most frequent users of a public structure from helping to pay for it contradicts the "user fee" principle that is needed for this type of transportation infrastructure.

Leavitt also said on Friday: "I'm trying to represent the businesses and commuters for the city of Vancouver." Fine, but trying to deflect tolling to areas beyond Vancouver, or to long-distance auto drivers and truckers, simply won't work. Every other politician who

has spoken on this issue, and most participants in CRC planning, understand the need for tolls.

We understand the desire for a reduced toll for frequent crossers. Such a tactic is allowed by law: RCW 47.46.090 mandates a "citizen advisory committee" for tolls and allows the group to make recommendations on such matters as "the feasibility of providing discounts to frequent users, electronic transponder users, senior citizens or students." But the Tacoma Narrows Bridge Citizen Advisory Committee ruled out frequent-user discounts for many reasons, including "favoring one worthy group to the expense of another worthy group" and the administrative costs that would be required. Regional state transportation Administrator Don Wagner says toll discounts could negatively affect bond-rating decisions. He called toll-discount discussions premature, a view shared by CRC Co-Director Doug Ficco, who said in a Tuesday interview that toll discounts won't even be considered for a couple of years.

One possibility that makes more sense than toll discounts for frequent users is an Oregon state income tax break for commuters who live in Washington state. However, convincing cash-strapped Oregon legislators to adopt that plan as a favor to people who never vote in Oregon elections requires more persuasion than we can imagine.

We wish politicians wouldn't get themselves in this jam, promising stuff they simply can't deliver. But it is the way the political game is played. For now Leavitt and the public will have to play this silly game: He shows he's looking out for the local guy. Then, if this bridge is ever built, he'll be able to tell the local residents who are paying the toll, "Hey, at least I tried."

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