

A Bridge to Nowhere: Building the Astoria-Megler Bridge

Rebecca Burrow, PE
Oregon Department of Transportation
USA

Abstract

In August of 1966, the governors of Oregon and Washington came together to dedicate a massive, 4.2 mile long, new bridge across the mouth of the Columbia River. Widely derided as a “Bridge to Nowhere” at the time of its construction, the Astoria-Megler Bridge connected the town of Astoria, Oregon with the relatively unsettled southern coast of Washington, completing the route of US 101 from Canada to Mexico. Replacing a ferry service, the planners hoped that the \$25 million expenditure at the time would bring new industry to the coastal area, as well as increasing tourism in both states. While the effect of the bridge on development is debatable, to the town, the bridge is now an indispensable member of the community.

Despite this significance, the Astoria-Megler bridge is still at risk, both from the expected effects of aging and from the newly discovered seismic hazard of the Oregon Coast. To deal with these challenges, future bridge planners will need to also include the community in their plans, but keep in mind the lessons of the past: How people view their community and the bridge can change. This paper will explore these changing opinions, examining how a bridge with relatively low traffic can still have a disproportionate impact on a community's self regard.