

Written Testimony for the Senate Committee on Business & Transportation on

SJR 16

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Founded in 1968, the Oregon Environmental Council (OEC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, membership-based organization. We advance innovative, collaborative solutions to Oregon's environmental challenges for today and future generations.

OEC **supports** SJR 16, which proposes an amendment to the Oregon Constitution to authorize use of motor vehicle-related revenue for infrastructure that reduces traffic burden of, or pollution from, motor vehicles on public roads in this state.

We appreciate that Oregon has a backlog of road maintenance needs, particularly at the city and county level, and do believe these needs are a top priority for funding. Our criticism of the constitutional restriction is that it focuses dollars on expensive and inefficient solutions to congestion that typically lead to more air pollution and carbon emissions.

Investing in transit, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and programs that reduce the need to drive alone is in most cases a less expensive, and certainly a more environmentally sound, way to extend existing highway capacity. Widening roads and expanding highway capacity simply isn't an effective way to deal with congestion over the long-term.¹ But, because a vast majority of transportation dollars in the state are restricted to roads alone, communities are forced to fund projects that may not be the best solution to their congestion problems.

In 2009 the Oregon Legislature directed ODOT to develop a "least-cost planning" model as a decision-making tool for transportation planning at both the state and regional level. Least cost planning is an approach to making decisions about how to allocate scarce resources in a way that considers a full range of transportation alternatives; considers all significant social and environment costs in the evaluation of alternatives; and uses cost-effectiveness as a key criterion. ODOT worked with stakeholders to develop "[Mosaic—Value and Cost Informed Planning](#)," which is considered one of the most advanced tools in the world for doing least-cost transportation planning.

Unfortunately, when a least-cost planning analysis finds that the best solution to a congestion problem would be mix of small increases in road capacity, plus increased transit in the corridor, plus pedestrian infrastructure improvements, the proposed set of solutions can rarely be implemented because of funding constraints. The dollars for the non-road improvements are almost impossible to come by because of the constitutional restriction and because there is very little state funding for the non-road solutions.

For this reason, OEC believes Oregon’s Constitution should be amended to allow vehicle-related fees to be used more broadly for a variety of transportation projects that reduce congestion more effectively than new road capacity and to reduce transportation’s global warming impact.

Would Oregon voters agree? Consider how you would respond to: “Would you rather spend a lot of money to build roads that reduce congestion only moderately and temporarily and cost a lot to maintain over time, or spend less money on transportation solutions that give you more choices and cleaner air?”

ⁱ Road expansion can reduce congestion in the near-term, but the benefits tend not to last. When we build additional road capacity, a phenomenon coined “triple convergence” occurs. First, many drivers who formerly used alternative routes during peak hours switch to the newly built capacity. Second, many drivers who formerly traveled before or after peak hours switch to driving during peak hours. Third, some travelers who used to take transit during peak hours switch to driving. The new capacity quickly fills up and creates demand for even more capacity. Groundbreaking research published in the late 1990s (Hansen & Huang, Transportation Research A, Vol. 31, No. 3, 1997), confirmed by many studies since then, found that 60-96% of increased highway capacity is filled with trips that would not have otherwise occurred within five years of a project’s completion. Moreover, when highways are expanded, people have an incentive to buy more cars and change their location. Businesses relocate to the fringe, as well. Over the long run, this intensifies congestion. This is not to suggest that increasing road capacity provides no benefits, but the better solution to congestion is often a mixture of solutions, which in most cases are far cheaper over the long run as well.