



# AMALGAMATED TRANSIT UNION

## Division 757

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### Public Testimony before the Joint Committee on Transportation Preservation and Modernization

Co-chairs and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jared Franz, and I'm the Public Policy Coordinator for Amalgamated Transit Union Local 757.

ATU 757 is the labor union representing transit operators, mechanics, dispatchers, and other essential transit workers across the state of Oregon; from Portland to Medford, Tillamook to Prineville, and every major transit system in between. We're proud to say that 100 years since our founding in Portland, we have grown to become the largest transit union in the entire Pacific Northwest.

The elected leadership of our union have commitments today and tomorrow, so I'm here on their behalf to tell you why thousands of active and retired transit workers in Oregon strongly oppose the transportation package as drafted. There must be substantially more money allocated to public transit (especially outside the Portland region), raised in a substantially more progressive way, with substantially more oversight of transit agencies, for us to even begin reconsidering this position.

This is not an opposition that ATU 757 makes lightly. Nobody in the state of Oregon is more committed to the growth and success of public transit than transit workers themselves. Likewise, nobody knows the challenges that public transit faces better than ATU 757 members. Despite the fact that we weren't among the invited special guests who testified to this committee yesterday, transit workers are the true experts on public transit in Oregon.

As a democratic union that recognizes and respects the expertise of transit workers, we recently asked all 5,322 active and retired ATU 757 members from every corner of this great state what they thought of this package. Members still have until Friday to return the surveys we sent them, but the response to our survey has already been overwhelming. And transit

workers' expressed opposition to this proposal has been equally overwhelming. We intend to provide the public with our final survey results next week after our deadline has passed, but we have so far witnessed a ratio of three to four transit workers in opposition for every transit worker in support.

Simply put, Oregonians deserve and demand better from our elected officials. This package is a masterpiece of compounding regressive taxation, with one unfair tax on low-income and working-class Oregonians after another, after another, after another. Indeed, we couldn't identify a single progressive tax in the entire proposal that makes corporations, landlords, and the wealthiest Oregonians pay their fair share for essential transportation infrastructure and services. Transit workers in this state, like hundreds of thousands of other working folks, feel betrayed by Republicans and Democrats alike who refuse to fight for fair taxation and economic justice.

The massive increase in state and regional gas taxes that are part of this proposal are simply the tip of a regressive-tax iceberg for low and middle-income Oregonians. Retirees living on a fixed income have been especially vocal about their inability to afford these new taxes.

Transit workers also clearly understand the transportation impacts of Oregon's housing policies and skyrocketing rents that are forcing low and middle-income people to live further and further away from the places they work, study, play, and pray. These struggling or displaced people are the ones who will bear the largest burden of the various regressive consumption and wage taxes in this package, not the corporations and the wealthy who will disproportionately benefit from the proposed investments.

Echo-chamber policy advocates respond to this concern by condescending to over-burdened workers, telling workers they know what's best for them, or suggesting workers don't appreciate the benefits that new tax burdens will provide.

To be clear, we would be absolutely thrilled if public transit was a robust and viable alternative to driving for most Oregonians. That's the future we are fighting for and a war we're determined to win. But that future isn't here yet, and it's not even close. Not even in Portland, where we have spent billions and billions of dollars on transit infrastructure, but transit mode share is small and shrinking; in part because service is slower and less reliable than it's been in decades, in part because TriMet's budget priorities don't reflect rider and worker priorities, and in part because of the land use and housing crisis we've already mentioned.

But the real kick in the teeth is that this package pretends to be pro-transit, while only allocating about 10% of total new revenue to public transportation. This package doesn't meaningfully accelerate a future where public transit and active transportation options like walking and biking are the robust transportation option that Oregonians want and deserve.

Moreover, the tokenized public transit expansion in this package is paid for by a regressive wage tax on all Oregon workers. ATU 757 members recognize this regressive wage tax on

workers for what it really is: yet another way of letting corporations, landlords, and the wealthiest Oregonians avoid paying their fair share for public infrastructure and services. ATU 757 members also recognize that while the initial flat tax on the wages of all Oregon workers is small, it is almost certain to grow over time, and will effectively chill any future conversations about fairer, more progressive funding options.

Transit workers recognize that almost half of this new revenue would go to TriMet, while the 40 other transit districts and agencies in the state who actually need new revenues are left with crumbs from the table. And even if we could overlook the economic injustice of the proposed wage tax (in addition to the other taxes and fees in the package), there is no faith among transit workers that this new revenue will be used in ways that reflect transit worker and transit rider priorities.

Indeed, by a greater than nine-to-one ratio so far, Oregon's transit workers have told us that they do not believe existing transit agency governance and management is trustworthy, accountable, and using existing resources wisely. This is true at almost every transit provider in the state, not just at TriMet. And it's as close to a consensus as you're ever going to see on a matter of public policy.

Yet, proposed accountability measures in the package are mostly post hoc and bureaucratic, with too little meaningful engagement of workers, riders, and most-impacted communities. Real estate and business interests will continue to dominate transit priorities in the state, we have no doubt; and transit ridership will continue to stagnate. Even attempts to explicitly exclude light rail projects from the use of new state revenue are hollow, because there is no way to actually accomplish this prohibition in practice.

Yes, we can tell TriMet not to spend state money directly on light rail construction, which the bill does. But TriMet's growing debt payments, almost exclusively due to light rail financing, are considered a general fund operating expense and the agency's budget is a shell game. Workers and riders both know this. In fact, the budget that TriMet approved just weeks ago includes a \$95 million transfer of general fund revenue into the agency's capital construction program. That's almost as much money as the wage tax is expected to raise for public transit across the entire state. All while TriMet lies to the public about not having money for expanded bus service or the low-income fare relief that riders have demand for years.

Oregonians deserve better. When ATU 757 has finished collecting and fully analyzing the surveys we sent to the thousands of transit workers in our state, we will return with concrete proposals for a fairer deal. But as I said before, at a bare minimum, there must be substantially more money allocated to public transit (especially outside the Portland region), raised in a substantially more progressive way, with substantially more oversight of transit agencies, for us to even begin reconsidering our position.

Thank you for your time.