



**Date:** March 16, 2021

**To:** Joint Committee on Transportation

**From:** Aaron Brown, No More Freeways

**Subject:** **Concerns about road tolling replacing congestion pricing, continued boondoggle freeway expansions that will destroy the earth's climate included in HB 3065 -5 Amendments**

No More Freeways wishes to thank Speaker Kotek for introducing this legislation and giving ample time for the Joint Committee on Transportation to listen to testimony discussing the implications of HB 3065 and its -5 Amendment during this morning's meeting. No More Freeways is the grassroots campaign actively fighting ODOT's proposed \$800 million freeway expansion in the backyard of PPS' Harriet Tubman Middle School. Our letter today will echo many of the technical concerns expressed in the written testimony submitted by private citizens Doug Allen and Joe Cortright, as well as the policy recommendations from organizations including the Safe Routes Partnership, Verde, The Street Trust, and 1000 Friends of Oregon.

Legislators during today's hearing expressed a desire to see the state move forward on a litany of truly laudable policy goals and outcomes. No More Freeways is genuinely supportive of the efforts to reduce traffic congestion - the phrase "traffic sucks" may be among the very small number of things that both Democrats and Republicans can agree on these days. Legislators also expressed a desire to invest in projects that would address seismic vulnerabilities and reduce carbon emissions, as well as creating economic stimulus and jobs in the wake of the covid recession.

Before legislators sign off on a blank check for ODOT to double down on this litany of freeway expansions around the region, No More Freeways asks legislators: how certain are you that ODOT's megaprojects will be in any way accountable to these laudable goals? ODOT is great at using flowery language, to use slights-of-hand to hide the impacts these freeways have to their communities, to claim that they are investing in the communities despite overwhelming opposition from said communities to these projects.

No More Freeways fundamentally believes that congestion pricing - not tolling - is great policy that needs to be implemented before freeway expansion. Oregon can either put prices on driving on high-demand roads to maximize the amount of money that the state makes, or to minimize the amount of congestion that Oregonians and freight faces while maneuvering on our freeway. Oregon simply cannot do both - and all the



legislators on this committee - on both sides of the aisle - should have reasons for concern that ODOT's actions here are designed to line up tolling as a potential slush fund for a bunch of outdated, questionable megaprojects, not to actually address congestion. This seems like a questionable use of funds, when there's so much need on existing roads, as Metro Council President Lynn Peterson testified this week.

If you've been paying any attention to the local media lately, you'll probably have noticed that ODOT's Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion isn't exactly going that well. Advocates and ODOT watchdogs have caught the agency repeatedly lying about the air pollution the freeway will create, the increased carbon emissions, the cost to the public, the traffic impacts to the neighborhood. We even caught the agency lying and hiding from the public basic details like "how many feet wide is the right of way" of the freeway. In addition to today's testimony, we are submitting for the public record a memo to all legislators that provides a brief overview of the history of the project that ODOT probably hasn't shared with you. We encourage you to read the memo and get familiar with it - it highlights the numerous examples of an agency deliberately hiding vital information from the public, greenwashing the momentous air pollution and carbon emissions impacts, and forces the question we've continued to ask: can we as Oregonians trust ODOT with our future?

Furthermore, 40% of Oregon's carbon emissions come from transportation. As an article in the Sunday edition of the New York Times reported, a recent study suggested that keeping vehicle miles travelled flat for the next thirty years would cut carbon emissions just as significantly as electrifying 205 million electric vehicles. ODOT talks a big game about these projects lowering carbon emissions - that's, politely, bunk. If ODOT was serious about carbon emissions, the agency would be dramatically investing more in transit, biking and walking - not writing a blank check for these projects. Instead, the Oregon Transportation Commission's vote to approve the most recent round of STIP funding completely ignored the overwhelming majority of comments demanding more investments in safer streets, better transit, and carbon-smart investments. There's simply no fundamental mechanism for everyday Oregonians to hold this agency towards our ostensible goals.

It's also worth noting that directing congestion pricing revenue towards building more freeways is like instituting a carbon tax but using the revenue made to build a new coal plant. It's antithetical to the entire point, if Oregon is serious about reducing congestion instead of maximizing revenue. Why aren't we using the revenue raised to invest in transportation alternatives? There's no equitable way to widen a freeway - providing Oregonians poor enough to not own a car with better transit service is a much better use of that revenue, and the communities (disproportionately low income and people of color) who end up living near freeways suffer preposterously significant public



health degradations from abysmal air pollution. Dementia, asthma, heart disease, lung cancer, and higher vulnerability to covid-19 - all linked to air pollution that comes from freeways (and much of this is from tire particulate, not the engines - even the most optimistic of electrification of cars won't magically resolve this issue). ODOT's \$800 million freeway expansion is literally in the backyard of Harriet Tubman Middle School, and their records we obtained from a public records request suggests they are intending on taking even more land from the campus to move the freeway even closer to the building. A report published by Portland State University researchers in 2018 said that Tubman had some of the worst air pollution in the state, and scientists recommended Tubman students forgo outdoor recess.

Whatever benefit could ostensibly be granted in the creation of new jobs and economic recovery is negated from the fact that freeway expansion simply is among the least labor-intensive of all public infrastructural investments a government agency could make. A 2020 report by Smart Growth American and Transportation for America showed that directing transportation funding towards in transit and walkable communities created 70% more jobs than investments in highways (this report has been submitted on the record as testimony). 70% is a big number! If the Joint Committee on Transportation wants to make sure that any economic recovery bill that Builds Back Better is empowering the largest number of Oregonians with paychecks and family wage jobs, legislators should discourage ODOT from locking in billions of dollars for all these freeway projects and instead direct the agency for infrastructure projects that actually serve the needs of their communities \*and\* create 70% more jobs.

We understand that some of No More Freeways' language seems annoying, alarmist, and radical. But we implore all of you on this call to at least adopt a "trust but verify" approach with the Oregon Department of Transportation. And even if you doubt some of the accusations that No More Freeways has made, we beg of you to please start asking critical questions of ODOT. Why aren't legislators actively grilling this agency to ask about how many miles of high speed rail, how many sidewalks near elementary schools, how many intercity buses connecting rural communities to jobs and hospitals we could instead be funding? Please do not fall for the failure of imagination that ODOT is hoping you'll sign off on. Senator Beyer spoke at the hearing about the importance of jurisdictional transfers and fixing orphan highways. A significant reason that his district has so many potholed, orphan highways is that ODOT has directed all their revenue to these further expansions instead of maintaining existing facilities. Dangerous orphan highways all over the state could receive significant funding if ODOT was forced to fix what they have before proposing more freeway expansion. These orphan highways are downright lethal, by the way - 40% of Washington County's traffic fatalities over the last decade have been on TV Highway, another orphan highway



that ODOT has neglected in pursuit of freeway expansion. Across the region, 82nd Avenue, SW Barbur, McLoughlin TV Highway, and Powell continue to remain among the most dangerous stretches of road in the region. Meanwhile, there hasn't been a single traffic fatality on the stretch of the Rose Quarter ODOT proposed for expansion in over a decade.

Investing billions of dollars in freeways in 2021 is the equivalent of investing billions of dollars in Blockbuster Video in 2005. Back in 2005, if someone approached you about investing your life's fortune in the retail video chain, you might consider it! Unless you were some tech mogul, you probably didn't know that an internet revolution would allow people to stream videos online and never need. And if you did, you'd look back on regret.

Legislators tasked with oversight of this agency should certainly pause before voting to support this amendment, which could essentially write ODOT a blank check to charge literally billions of dollars to proceed with advancing these costly boondoggles that demonstrably will not improve congestion, but will pollute the air and wreck havoc to the climate. What mechanisms are you going to put in place to check in whether ODOT is actually delivering any of the bold promises?

You might have missed it (ODOT doesn't exactly like to publicize it), but in 2018, ODOT's own consultants who studied pricing on their Value Pricing Commission published a report openly admitting that the massive freeway expansion the agency proposed would have minimal impact on traffic congestion. It seems baffling to me that, in the interest of fiscal jurisprudence alone, the state legislators aren't actively asking to see if congestion could be solved with implementation of congestion pricing before freeway expansion - who knows, we might save \$800 million dollars. This dynamic is, of course, true for every one of ODOT's freeway megaprojects around the region, and is backed up with literally decades of near unanimous research from urban transportation academics. At the very least, in the interest of freeing up \$800 million to spend on other infrastructure projects that will green the environment, put more Oregonians to work, and lower traffic fatalities - isn't it worth at least studying it?

In closing, we thank you for your time. We don't know how else to express our sincerity that we understand the political and personal desire to "follow through" on the megaprojects projects originally slated in House Bill 2017. In some ways, the need has become even more apparent - our state desperately needs the jobs, and No More Freeways emphatically agrees that tackling traffic congestion is an imperative for economic growth and well-being of our region and state (I reiterate - traffic sucks!). However, ODOT's track record continues to suggest this isn't the agency that will provide any of you - urban suburban or rural, Democrat or Republican - what you're hoping to provide to constituents. All of you on the Joint Transportation Committee have



to decide if you want to hold them accountable to actually spending these billions of dollars in ways that benefit our community. But you ultimately may have to choose between fulfilling your promise in delivering the HB 2017 goals or making investments that actually address climate, congestion, and cleaner air.

No More Freeways would actively love to speak to any legislator or elected official - regardless of party or currently held position or opinion on ODOT's megaprojects - and work together to discuss the importance of redirect transportation funding in ways that actively meets the needs of our changing, warming state. Please do not hesitate to reach out. and we encourage you to keep an eye out for the headlines that await the Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion in the next month.