

Testimony of Metro Councilor Christine Lewis
Joint Committee on Transportation Special Committee on
Transportation Planning
January 6, 2024



Metro is the elected regional government that serves nearly 1.7 million people in the 24 cities and three counties of the Portland metropolitan area. We provide a broad range of public services that includes land use and transportation planning, solid waste and recycling operations, housing and homeless services, management of parks and natural areas, and operation of major visitor facilities like the Oregon Convention Center and the Oregon Zoo.

I serve on Metro Council representing the communities of District 2, including Gladstone, Oregon City, West Linn, Milwaukie, Happy Valley, Lake Oswego, Clackamas and Southwest Portland. I've been closely involved in many discussions about the I-205 tolling program and Regional Mobility Pricing Program (RMPP): as a Metro Councilor sitting on crucial transportation committees; as a representative of this region hearing daily from my constituents in opposition to the tolling program, more than on any other topic or issue; as a West Linn resident who will be directly impacted because my family and I live two blocks off Willamette Falls drive, the current third lane of 205; and finally, as someone who has long been engaged in discussions about how to build infrastructure while reducing our dependence on the gas tax.

I want to thank the committee for taking the time to visit and hear directly from impacted communities. You most likely traveled I-205 and the Abernathy Bridge to get here today. Lucky for you it's the middle of the day on the weekend; on a weekday afternoon it is a very different experience.

My comments today will focus on the need for any tolling program to address diversion on local roads, a critical piece necessary to address our shared safety and congestion management goals. My Metro Council colleagues have also offered additional feedback at the other field hearings on other important topics such as congestion pricing, low-income impacts, and the need for transit expansion.

Metro supported HB 2017 in part because of its inclusion of a tolling program. The region consented to an additional surcharge with the understanding that the program would set up a system to provide revenue source for major projects, manage congestion on our interstates through pricing, and address acute local needs on our system. Instead, we've watched a program develop focused primarily on raising revenue for the interstate system with limited commitment to addressing local needs and without nuance in approaches to congestion management. In addition, the current plan doesn't even fully cover the interstate needs, as evidenced by the elimination of the second phase of the I-205 construction project. Further, both on the ground understanding of traffic patterns and the advanced modeling used by the project team have shown that congestion management isn't really possible with just one or two toll collection points—it requires a whole system approach. As a result, the current iteration of the I-205 project and the preliminary RMPP is not the program Metro understood HB 2017 envisioned and not one we can support.

Tolling I-5 and I-205 will significantly change the traffic patterns throughout these corridors, and the state must implement a holistic approach to managing traffic on the impacted local roads as well as on the main highway. ODOT's own Value Pricing report found that investment in transit improvements and

other multimodal improvements must be paired with pricing in the tolling corridor in order to serve low-income people and people of color. Without these investments and holistic approach, the congestion will simply move from the freeway system onto local roads ill-equipped to manage it, and potentially undermine traffic safety on our local roads. I need to underscore that this is not a transit level of service issue—while increased frequency would be great, adding just another bus to a gridlocked, narrow, one lane each direction road will not suffice. We will need new routes, new connections, and real transit infrastructure.

I am hopeful that the Governor's pause on tolling and the work of this committee represents a reset and a refocus on the tolling program's critical goals.

You might hear that when tolls have been introduced in other states, there is a common pattern. Typically, there is loud opposition until the projects are complete, the tolls are introduced, and new traffic patterns take hold and offer a benefit. Then, most opposition quiets. I've gone up to Washington, toured their facilities, heard about their experiences introducing express lanes and building new tolled infrastructure. I heard from Washington Department of Transportation about their community engagement.

I want to underscore that this is different. The I-205 project that is currently being contemplated would cause significant harm to our communities while providing little to no benefit. You are the leaders charged with scoping the program, with determining the purpose and parameters of tolling. It would be wholly unacceptable to just push through the noise to deliver the project.

It is important to understand how critical the I-205 corridor is to the local communities. West Linn is already shouldering the burden of the bottleneck. The third lane of I-205 is Willamette Falls Drive. When the highway slows down, our one-way each direction local road fills to capacity and no longer operates as a local street. It negates the multimodal investments and facilities designed to promote safe crossings. However, ODOT's approach has not been to use this project to remedy the current situation. It feels like we are getting punished for local trips while other HB 2017 projects are designed to explicitly accommodate and enhance local connectivity.

Metro is concerned that the current trajectory of the program will not create the outcomes that we need. We need clear legislative direction to the agency to deliver on the promises of HB 2017 – that any tolling program in our region will relieve congestion, deliver on major projects, and solve local transportation challenges. Examples of this include things like committing to addressing diversion through a real conversation about revenue reinvestment with local jurisdictions, being transparent about toll rates and how the structure of the program is set up to actively manage traffic flows, understanding the importance of the third lane on I-205, and to see community priorities reflected in the materials, models, and studies.

Metro remains open and committed to working with our state legislative partners, the agency, and our region to ensure that the transportation needs of our state and region are addressed. Thank you for your time and attention and for your commitment to working on critical transportation funding issues.