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To: Oregon Joint Committee on Transportation

CC: Portland Transportation Commissioner Mingus Mapps
Oregon Transportation Commission

From: Joe Cortright, No More Freeways
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Subject: **Preserve Funding for Critical Statewide Road Maintenance and Street Safety Projects by Right Sizing Proposed Freeway Expansions and Fixing ODOT Financial Mismanagement**

“Some highway engineers have a mentality ... that would run an eight-lane freeway through the Taj Mahal. That is our problem.”

– Oregon Governor Tom McCall, 1970

As the Joint Committee on Transportation approaches the 2025 legislative session and contemplates new revenue sources and priorities, we would urge you to keep the following principles in mind:

Fix it First

We absolutely must maintain the state’s existing transportation assets. ODOT has systematically short-changed maintenance and diverted funds to expensive highway expansion projects. Maintenance must be legislatively prioritized, not left as the remainder after capacity projects are funded. Our organization is eager to encourage our thousands of constituents across the state to support initiatives that prioritize funding to address the backlogged maintenance and safety needs faced by ODOT as well as cities and counties.

Reinforce the “User Pays” Concept

Since 1939, Oregon has maintained a commitment to a “user pays” system to provide funding for our roads and highways. We should not raid the General Fund for highway projects as was done with the IBR (a decision that should be reversed - the remaining \$750 million in bonding promised to the IBR in the 2023 legislature should be raised through the highway trust fund



instead of general obligation bonds). Transportation fees and taxes should be indexed to inflation and it's time to begin implementation of road user fees that tie how much a person pays to how much they use state roads. Where roadways appear congested, tolling may be appropriate for managing congestion, allowing users to pay for traveling at peak times and encouraging use of existing off-peak capacity, so long as any revenues that are used to provide additional capacity are spent on transit, bicycle, and pedestrian facilities and services. Legislation will be needed to enforce these limitations on tolling.

We recognize that any campaign to raise new revenue requires enormous political leadership. Our organization is eager to loudly support policy initiatives that raise the necessary revenue to address the backlogged maintenance and safety needs, and help educate Oregonians about the imperative of supporting these investments

Focus Investment on Safety and Climate

The slaughter of pedestrians and other road users continues to accelerate, much of it on ODOT-owned facilities. Fully funding the Safe Routes to School and Great Streets programs is essential. Traffic fatalities on Oregon's streets have increased 70% since 2010.¹

The HB 2017 STIF program has been transformative for transit around the state, especially outside of large urban areas. This program and revenue source should be expanded several fold. The state should also aggressively pursue the establishment of a passenger rail authority to dramatically increase intercity service across the state and throughout the Willamette Valley in particular. No More Freeways supports initiatives led by entities like the Oregon Transit Association, Verde, AORTA and 1000 Friends of Oregon to pursue an equitable funding mechanism for an aggressive expansion of statewide transit operations.

Right Size the Portland Area-Megaprojects

ODOT is pursuing three billion-dollar-a-mile Portland area freeway expansion projects (the Interstate Bridge Replacement, the Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion and the Abernethy Bridge/I-205 Expansion). All of these projects are over-sized and over-budget, and ODOT could deliver the desired congestion relief at a fraction of the cost under the direction of firm legislative leadership and demands for ODOT's spending accountability. The costs of these projects could be dramatically reduced if they were narrowed in width (Rose Quarter), and restricted to their stated purpose (rebuilding just the bridge, rather than widening 5 miles of freeway and rebuilding 7 interchanges (IBR). In addition, those who don't use these projects shouldn't be forced to pay for them. **The enormous (and continually growing) costs of these bloated megaprojects jeopardizes our ability to prioritize funding for the overwhelming**

¹"Oregon data shows traffic deaths on the rise across the state" *Oregon Public Broadcasting*. November 28, 2023: <https://www.opb.org/article/2023/11/28/oregon-data-shows-traffic-deaths-increasing/>



backlogged maintenance and safety needs experienced on local, county and state roads.

The \$1.9 Billion Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion in particular is mired in multiple legal battles, and will continue in years ahead to drain untold millions of dollars in planning and litigation without bold legislative direction to right-size the project.² Rightsizing this project also allows the unprecedented federal investment in reconnecting the Albina neighborhood to move forward faster, and with less negative impact from increased traffic and air pollution.

Reorient the Urban Mobility Office

HB 2017 promised the Portland metro area a \$450M congestion relief project with a dedicated funding source from a gas tax increase. That promise has been delivered, in fact over-spent at \$750M, on the I-205 Abernethy Bridge (which wasn't even funded in the HB 2017 legislation).

The conversation about Rose Quarter has evolved appropriately to be about mitigating past harms. Capping the existing freeway would be far less expensive than building caps across a facility that doubles in width.³

The Urban Mobility Office should drop its freeway expansion agenda and instead focus on increasing mobility in the region via transit, biking, walking and implementation of Great Streets transformations.

There should be a particular focus on transit in Clackamas County. The recent discussion on tolling has dramatically underscored the need for transit alternatives in that part of the region.

Correct ODOT financial mismanagement

ODOT's financial crisis is not a revenue problem: It is a spending problem. ODOT has experienced cost overruns of 200 percent to 300 percent on each of its major projects, and has failed to acknowledge this is a problem or take corrective steps⁴. The agency has unwisely used debt to start projects for which it doesn't have full funding. ODOT is spending an increasing share of its budget on debt service, meaning it is spending more money on interest, and less money on roads. ODOT shouldn't get more money for new capital construction projects until it corrects its mismanagement.

²"Freeway opponents launch latest effort to stymie a contentious Portland highway project" *Oregon Public Broadcasting*. May 14, 2024.

<https://www.opb.org/article/2024/05/14/rose-quarter-freeway-expansion-lawsuit-albina-portland/>

³Via public records requests, No More Freeways has obtained documents demonstrating the width of the proposed Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion is over 160 feet, roughly double the current width and significantly more wide than has been shared with the general public. More information available via *City Observatory*:

https://cityobservatory.org/rq_hiding_ten_lanes/

⁴ODOT's Reign of Error: Chronic highway cost overruns" *City Observatory*. September 6, 2022:

<https://cityobservatory.org/odots-reign-of-error-chronic-highway-cost-overruns/>



Adopt Colorado and Minnesota's more rigorous mandates to reduce VMT statewide

A recent report by the Rocky Mountain Institute states that a 20% reduction in Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) in Oregon would annually save the typical household \$1450, eliminate 67 traffic fatalities and 488 deaths related to poor air pollution and low physical activity, and eliminate 26 million metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions over the next twenty five years.⁵ Colorado and Minnesota have both enacted legislation that forces their state DOT to evaluate the VMT impacts of future transportation projects, and Oregon should pursue similar legislation.⁶

Engage transportation and environmental advocates as accomplices in crafting the transportation package

It is nothing short of critical that the Oregon Legislature pass a bold transportation package that addresses the numerous overlapping crises caused by our neglect to modernize, reform, and invest in our outdated transportation system. Investments in traffic safety, road maintenance, and climate-focused transit investments are wildly popular with Oregonians and are significantly more cost effective investments in the future of our state.

We implore legislators to listen to and collaborate with the dozens of community advocacy organizations eager to support a bold transportation package that prioritizes maintenance, safety and transit instead of doubling down on outdated mistakes of the past.

Thank you for your consideration of these issues. We look forward to continuing to engage with you throughout the duration of the transportation package conversation.

⁵"Smarter MODES Calculator: Smarter Mobility Options for Decarbonization, Equity, and Safety" *Rocky Mountain Institute*:

<https://rmi.org/insight/smarter-modes-calculator-smarter-mobility-options-for-decarbonization-equity-and-safety>

⁶ "Colorado's Bold New Approach to Highways — Not Building Them" *New York Times*, May 31 2024.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/31/headway/highways-colorado-transportation.html>