

## **Transit funding, service lags in Oregon**

**Brief:** As intercity rail (Amtrak Cascades) experiences record ridership, Portlanders, and Oregonians at large, suffer the consequences of poor public transit funding, resulting in inadequate service, struggling infrastructure, and harmful effects to the environment. The Oregon Legislature must fund a massive expansion of public transit, including bus, BRT, light rail, regional rail, and intercity rail (Amtrak Cascades). Most importantly, the downtown MAX tunnel must be built to ensure the viability of Portland's light rail system.

**Comment:**

To the Oregon Legislature Joint Committee on Transportation,

Thank you for taking the time to visit our communities to understand how transportation funding must be allocated in Portland and Oregon, at large. In my written comment—and in the testimony you hear at the meeting—you will see how Oregon's public transit needs a massive and immediate influx of funding to expand services, increase reliability, and offer a variety of transportation options. Further, Oregon should be focused on fighting the climate crisis by reducing carbon emissions from single-occupancy vehicles and reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT).

Last Saturday, June 1, is a great place to start to show of how Portland's public transit is suffering. Hundreds of thousands of people flocked to the city center Saturday for various springtime events: the Starlight Parade, a Timbers Match, the Pedalpalooza Kickoff Ride, among other attractions that brought in large crowds. Naturally there are not 200,000 parking spaces in the central city so transit would be the obvious and most efficient way to move people in and out of the city.

Things were off to a good start, but Trimet's first service alert appeared at 6pm telling riders to expect delays on the MAX Green Line due to a lack of operators, lasting 5 hours through 11:30pm. This is about the time when Timbers fans and parade-goers were making their way downtown. I was just concluding my ride with the Pedalpalooza kick off, ending at Laurelhurst Park, and made my way to Hollywood Transit Center to catch a Green Line home to Clackamas. I waited at Hollywood Transit Center for 30 minutes for my train, the only train to arrive that entire time. Arrivals usually happen every few minutes along the I-84 mainline tracks. A westbound Red Line train to downtown was stuck at the platform that entire time, too. Curious, I opened each of my transit tracker applications on my smartphone and immediately saw what was wrong.

Trains were stacked up from downtown, across the Steel bridge, through the Rose Quarter and Lloyd District, down the I-84 mainline, and all the way to Gateway Transit Center. Trains that should have been moving, arriving every 15 minutes per line, carrying thousands of people efficiently to and from the festivities, were stuck because of two reasons: cars were blocking the tracks and the Steel bridge was again a massive bottleneck. These problems can be fixed by funding Trimet services, expanding transit services in Portland (regional rail, BRT, etc.), and building the downtown MAX tunnel.

The problem with running MAX trains in mixed traffic throughout the city is that selfish car drivers will block the tracks without considering the delays and cancellations public transit riders will suffer. The Portland metro region deserves reliable, frequent, and efficient light rail transit service. That can only happen by building the downtown MAX tunnel. The Steel bridge is an aging structure, owned by a freight railroad company notorious for failing to maintain their infrastructure, and only allows a small number of trains to cross per hour at very slow speeds. By building the tunnel from roughly the Lloyd District to Goose Hollow, MAX riders will benefit from increased reliability and will **save more than 20 minutes** on travel times. This investment is a no-brainer.

The decades the state has spent expanding freeways and making it easier and faster to drive in Portland has only encouraged more people to drive as our population grows. This is called **induced demand: the principle that making it easier to drive (expanding freeways, adding auxiliary lanes, increasing speeds, lowering travel times) only encourages more driving**. Thus, as the state continues to fund freeways expansion and road projects beyond general maintenance, the problem of congestion is never solved. If expanding freeways worked, Los Angeles wouldn't have any traffic since their freeways are so big, right? I think we can all agree that we don't want to be like LA. So as Portlanders flocked to the city center for all these events last Saturday, it's clear that they chose to drive. They clogged the streets of Portland, polluted the air we breathe, and prevented transit riders from reaching their destinations in a timely manner.

The matter of encouraging driving is a matter of funding: Where the state directs its money is an expression of its goals and priorities. The JCT should fund road maintenance, sure, but the era of freeway expansion; the era of making it easier for suburbanites to drive to the dense central city ends here. At a meeting of the JCT during the last legislative session, Co-Chair McLain said in response to testimony supporting the expansion of WES commuter rail that "our transportation funding should be balanced." I agree that our transportation funding should be balanced. However Representative McClain, there is no balance as the budget currently stands. Oregon's budget prioritizes car infrastructure over public transit, cycling, and pedestrian infrastructure by a large margin. Our transportation options as Oregonians are severely lacking as other cities and regions of similar sizes across the world have access to more and better non-car transportation systems. Public transit fails to be efficient and reliable because funding has lagged at a state level for far too long.

At a state level, Oregon also needs to fund and expand regional rail, like WES, and intercity rail, like Amtrak Cascades. **In March 2024, Amtrak Cascades experienced its highest ridership ever** between Portland and Eugene, setting a 30-year record. This was achieved with only two daily round trips. Think about what ridership would be with hourly departures between Portland and Eugene! This would offer more transportation options for Oregonians, reduce carbon emissions and VMT, and reduce congestion on I-5. Increasing service on Amtrak Cascades is an obvious solution, yet somehow Oregon's rail projects sit idle, unfunded and behind schedule. The state needs to get serious about funding rail improvements for passenger and freight services.

In addition to intercity rail, the legislature should be creating and funding regional rail. 100 years ago, Willamette Valley residents could travel on electric trains throughout the valley

without the need to buy gas or get stuck in traffic like we have to today. A balanced transportation network with balanced funding would offer such non-car options to traverse the state. I was excited to see the expansion of WES commuter rail from Wilsonville to Salem in the legislature again this year. I was equally disappointed in the legislature for failing to pass this bill and once again put it off another year. Although I believe this gives the state an even better opportunity to make bigger plans for Willamette Valley regional rail service, serving commutes along I-5 (Woodburn, Donald, Keizer, Salem), Hwy 99E (Canby, Aurora, Hubbard), Hwy 99W (Sherwood, Newberg, Dundee, McMinnville, Monmouth, Corvallis), among other cities in our region.

Members of the JCT, thank you again for taking the time to visit our community to learn how transportation funding should be allocated in our region. In order to fight the climate crisis and reduce congestion, the legislature must fund public transit.

Sincerely,  
Mick Hangland-Skill  
Clackamas, OR