

The Safety Problems of Beltline Highway

We are the six Eugene Neighborhood Associations along the Beltline. Nearly half of the population of Eugene lives in our six neighborhoods.

The Beltline Highway is a constant presence for us because it is the only route connecting the city north of downtown. It is North Eugene's connection to I-5 and medical services.

It is dangerously congested and overused, seismically unfit, and unable to support multi-modal transportation. Urgent needs: overdue maintenance, relief for Beltline congestion, and a safe route for multi-modal local trips.

Background

The Beltline was constructed sixty years ago as a thruway. The areas around it have grown more than was anticipated at the time. Commuter traffic turns it into a parking lot during peak hours. It is used extensively for local trips as well, with frequent on-and-off merging adding to the congestion and danger.

ODOT has been working on plans for fixing Beltline's problems for decades. By 2014, it had developed the Beltline Facility Plan for addressing the stretch from the Delta Highway interchange to River Road. The plans have National Environment Policy Act approval.

Urgent Needs

- 1. Adequate funds for maintenance.** Repair and upkeep has fallen behind schedule. But maintenance alone won't solve the problems.
- 2. Funding to continue the Facility Plan.** The upgrade of the Delta Highway/Beltline interchange is funded. The next step is to replace the existing bridges over the Willamette with seismically sound structures.
- 3. In particular, funding for a new arterial bridge north of the existing one.** This bridge is a critical part of the Plan. It will cross from Green Acres Road on the east side to the Santa Clara area on the west. It will alleviate Beltline congestion and create a safe, multi-modal local connection.

Key Benefits of the Arterial Bridge

Reduced Beltline congestion. ODOT calculates that over 17,000 local trips per day will be taken off the Beltline, reducing its congestion dramatically.

A safer route for short trips, at local speeds rather than highway. This will particularly benefit the large populations of seniors who live near this site. The census areas on both sides of the river have concentrations of senior citizens significantly above that of Lane County as a whole.

Multimodal transportation. There is no transit route across the river north of downtown because LTD does not run buses on Beltline. The arterial bridge will link transit from the new Santa Clara transit station through to Peace Health's Riverbend Hospital. It will also create lanes for pedestrians and cyclists, connecting to Eugene's extensive multiuse path networks that are separated by the river.

Resiliency. It will provide an alternative route in the case of an accident on Beltline or a regional disaster. The new arterial bridge will be constructed to the latest seismic requirements, designed to survive a Cascadia subduction zone earthquake, whereas the existing bridge is not seismically sound.

Economic vitality. These are areas of employment and commercial density, with major retail sites, hospitals and medical services, and local business. The arterial bridge will make this economic activity safer and more vibrant.

Official Support

We have the support of our city, county, and state elected officials, Lane Transit District, and ODOT. City of Eugene staff is taking steps in preparation. It has been working with Lane County on land use issues. Next week, the City Council will vote to dedicate \$5 million to use in matching larger grants.

Two major funding steps are needed: \$6 million for final design and right-of-way acquisition; \$119 million for construction (a 2022 estimate). **We ask your consideration for these needs in transportation funding packages.**

Thank you for creating this opportunity to testify,

Active Bethel Community, Lin Woodrich & Tai Pruce Zimmerman, Co-chairs
River Road Community Organization, Jon Belcher, Dan Isaacson, Co-chairs
Santa Clara Community Organization, Kate Perle, Chair
Northeast Neighbors Neighborhood Association, Richard Edwards, Chair
Cal Young Neighborhood Association, Katie Werner, Chair
Harlow Neighbors Association, Katherine Jensen, Chair

(Submitted by John Faville, Northeast Neighbors, 2216 Marie Lane, Eugene)

More detailed statements of benefits:

Safety and Resilience

- It is safer to travel at arterial speeds rather than on a congested highway. The Beltline is experiencing increased rates of speeding and accidents.
- The existing 60-year-old Beltline bridge across the Willamette is seismically fragile and could fail as a route in or out in a serious earthquake. Even when it is replaced, we will need an alternative emergency response route.
- Emergency vehicles need an alternative in case of complete stoppage or slowness due to Beltline congestion. In particular we need an alternative route for access from the west side of the river to Riverbend emergency services.

Transit

- At present there is no route for transit across the river until all the way south to downtown.
- LTD Route 66 along Crescent/Green Acres on the east side of the proposed bridge is already a well utilized route. Extension across the river can link it to LTD's routes on the west side.
- LTD envisions a route running from the new Santa Clara station on River Road to PeaceHealth's Riverbend Hospital to the east of I-5. Transit connecting the Coburg and River Road corridors will complete the transit loops serving the whole northern portion of the city.

Active Transportation

- Dedicated bicycle lanes and wide, safe sidewalks will open routes where there are currently none.
- There will be two new parks just north of the bridge site on the east side of the Willamette. Planned paths there would connect across the river and fit with long-term City planning goals for active transportation.

Social Equity

- The bridge will benefit the significant concentrations of senior citizens who live along both routes leading to it. Central Lane MPO data lists the average "elderly" population as 16.3%. The two census areas to the east of the proposed bridge have 29% and 23% "elderly." The two areas immediately to the west have 31% and 33%.
- These neighbors will have more transit options as well as a safer route for driving. This group is particularly vocal about the risks of using the Beltline.
- On the east side, three large 55+ communities are within walking distance to LTD, with a total of nearly 500 residences (Lakeridge of Eugene, Falcon

Wood Village, Summer Oaks Park). Also within walking distance: Crescent Park Senior Living and Bascom Village affordable housing.

Environment

- New opportunities will be created for transit and active transportation to replace travel by automobile. Walking and biking will have dedicated lanes.
- Shortened travel routes will lessen environmental impact.
- Congested, inefficient traffic will be able to move smoothly and efficiently.

Economic Vitality

- The bridge will connect significant areas of employment, services, and destination shopping.
- Retail magnets on the east side include : Walmart, Market of Choice, Home Depot, Costco, and WinCo.
- The west: Fred Meyer, Jerry's Home Improvement, Lane Forest Products.
- On both sides of the river: large neighborhoods whose residents flood into Beltline in order to work, shop, and get to services.

Congestion

- Traffic on the Beltline far exceeds the capacity it was designed for. It has already returned to pre-pandemic levels. It is congested, inefficient, and dangerous.
- ODOT estimates that the arterial bridge will take 25% of peak hour traffic off the Beltline, local traffic that should not have been forced to use it in the first place. The Beltline was planned to move regional through-traffic, not short local trips.
- From the neighborhoods to the west all the way to the City of Coburg, the whole area will benefit from reduced congestion and reduced re-routing through local neighborhoods to avoid that congestion.

The Future

- Growth will continue in north and west Eugene.
- Expansion of the Urban Growth Boundary at some point is inevitable, extending the City to the west. When this happens, the already overused Beltline will face greatly increased pressure.
- Commercial and service development along the route will also continue. Extensive acreage zoned for further commercial development remains.