

Testimony on HB 2691
Before the Joint Transportation Committee
February 21, 2023

Co-Chairs Sen Gorsek, Rep McClain, and members of the Joint Transportation Committee:

Thank you Representative Nathanson, and others, for sponsoring this important bill. We have long neglected the need for a comprehensive transportation system. Those who have their hands on the steering wheel focus on moving vehicles, *not* people and freight. Spreading more expensive pavement is not “Safe, Economical, Environmental, or Equitable.”

In 1977-79 the **Willamette Valley Rail Study** proposed a Portland-Eugene demonstration project – but funding did not pass in the 1979 legislature. Shortly thereafter, federal funding became available. On October 24, 1979 the Oregon Transportation Commission voted to refer, and ODOT’s Public Transit Division brought to the Legislature’s Emergency Board, a proposal to fund the project. The E-Board approved funding **15-2!** On August 3, 1980, and for 18 months, we had two daily “**Willamette Valley Express**” trains, plus the ***Coast Starlight***, operating roundtrip between Portland and Eugene. For a variety of reasons, including poor ticket pricing and lack of advertising, ridership was disappointing – but Oregon was the first state to increase passenger trains in the Eugene - Vancouver, BC corridor.

In subsequent years, Washington assumed much of the leadership role – we have been tail on the dog. Fascination with the glitter of “ultra-high speed rail” has distracted the Governor of Washington. Higher speed rail is a worthwhile long-term objective, but high-speed rail (HSR) will not be successful without a comprehensive rail (and bus) system which transports people to intermediate destinations and provides connectivity with other destinations. (NOTE: Trip time needs far more focus than “top speed.”)

HSR systems are not free-standing. Nowhere in the world does HSR function without a supportive system of trains (and buses), such as our slowly evolving ***Amtrak Cascades*** service.

HB 2691 recognizes - to move toward HSR, we must first build the foundation upon which it depends. We must **plan** for HSR tomorrow – today we must **build** “Safe, Economical, Environmental, Equitable” passenger rail. **SEEE** our future. Our Cascades passenger trains must become more frequent and reliable, and realize shorter trip times, before the high cost of implementing HSR can be cost-effective. Our Cascades system must connect with other parts of the state, with trains where feasible, and with buses, to serve all Oregonians – connecting communities - and strengthening our tourist industry.

Focusing on connecting major population centers, e.g., Portland and Seattle, is a recipe for failure. It will not generate sufficient public support from other parts of Oregon and Washington.

Federal funding for rail is more available today than ever before. It is time, again, for Oregon to act.

Thank you, Representative Nathanson, Senator Gorsek, and others, for recognizing the need to connect and serve all Oregonians.

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