

Good evening and thank you to the honorable members of the joint committee for agreeing to hold this period of public testimony on this incredibly important topic for the state.

I would like to draw attention to the “whereas” clauses of the latest amendment to HB 2098, as I think that gives us, both the members of the Legislative Assembly and the public at large, the background and goals of what this proposed legislation is supposed to do. I have to say that as I was reading them, I broadly agreed with most, if not all of the stated reasons this legislation should be adopted. After all, who doesn’t want improved public safety, economic growth, reduced congestion, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions? But as I was reading these clauses, a few snippets jumped out at me that seem wildly out of step with what the actual proposed plan is to improve the Rose Quarter and replace the Interstate Bridge. So I would like to go through and express my concerns as a pedestrian, a cyclist, a motorist, an asset management professional, a resident of the Madison South neighborhood of Portland, an Oregon citizen, and a living person on the only planet we know of capable of supporting life in the hopes that the Joint Committee and the Legislative Assembly as a whole will return to the drawing board to bring the state transportation projects that actually fit Oregon’s transportation and public safety needs.

First, “Whereas the current Interstate 5 bridge ... has exceeded its useful lifespan, leading to frequent traffic congestion and safety hazards.” While I agree with the need to replace or retrofit the aging Interstate Bridge, particularly in the event of a large Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake, the plan put forward by the IBRP goes well beyond that reasonable requirement. The project has ballooned to include several highway improvement subprojects, most concerning among them the expansion of the existing highway from six lanes to eight and the construction of seven new interchanges over a five miles of the highway’s alignment. The IBRP staff and boosters of the project would have us believe that these additions to the project scope are necessary in order to meet the stated goals of reducing congestion. I am here to confidently say that if that were the case, LA and Houston would be winning awards for their global excellence in having eliminated gridlock in their metropolitan areas. Of course, that’s ridiculous, as both of those cities are particularly famous for their constant congestion and stressful commutes. Indeed, the only way to truly solve the problem of congestion is to provide reasonable alternatives to driving in order to move freight and passengers. I’d like to use myself as an example here: Before the pandemic, I used to live in far west Portland, just off of the Sylvan exit of Highway 26 and commute to work on a daily basis to my office in north Vancouver, near Hazel Dell. At the time, it was about a 25-30 minute drive in the morning and 30-45 minutes in the afternoon. Being the eco-conscious and cost-conscious person that I was, I would have preferred to ditch my car for a bus pass

that my employer was gracious enough to provide free of charge. I never took advantage of that opportunity, though, because the absolute best case scenario for taking transit to work and back would have tripled my overall commute time. It took so long because it required several transfers between buses, many of the buses only came once or twice an hour, and the buses that did come got stuck in the same congested traffic as everyone else instead of being given their own right-of-way. The alternative to driving my car was simply not reasonable, so I ended up being just another commuter driving alone across the bridge twice a day, taking up 83 square feet of road, plus following distance, contributing to congestion so that I could have an extra hour of time with my family at home after work. What would have helped is if Trimet and CTran ran more frequent buses and had faster express options with better coverage, not an additional auxiliary lane or bigger interchanges for everyone to use in their private cars carrying 1.5 people per trip.

Which brings me to the next clause that doesn't line up with the project reality, "Whereas a replacement bridge would enhance safety for all users, including pedestrians, cyclists and drivers." It shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone here that operating motor vehicles are dangerous to human safety. Oregon's own data shows that there were 507 people killed and another 27,998 people injured in motor vehicle traffic crashes in 2020 alone, a year when many of us were doing our best to stay home and avoid getting sick. Even so, the number of fatalities rose by 2.63% from the 2019, even as injuries fell by almost 30%, which indicates to me that the only thing keeping even more people from dying in 2019 was the fact that there were more people in each other's way slowing everybody down. Many of these people who died were motorists or passengers, yes, which is to be expected when the statewide share of people who travel by automobile is so large compared to all other modes, but 78 pedestrians and 14 bicyclists were killed by people operating a motor vehicle that year. Making it easier for more people to drive, especially at higher speeds and for longer distances, which is what these two projects will do, will only serve to encourage more people to drive and, tragically, kill themselves and other road users. Again, I'll use myself as an example. Tomorrow I'll be going to a physical therapy appointment in NE Portland near the intersection of 122nd and Airport. It's not far from where I live, about a 10 minute drive or a 20 minute bike ride. But if I were to bike I would have to ride down 122nd Ave in an unprotected bicycle lane—or what we in the bicycling community often call a "bicycle gutter", but that's truthfully what they are—alongside and sometimes crossing in front of traffic going 45 mph or more, and navigate multiple large intersections with 5 lanes of traffic. I'm fairly athletic and a confident rider, and even so, I'd say that route is a death wish. For those members unfamiliar with the area, much of my ride would be in close proximity I-205 and I-84, which does double duty in both cutting off low volume "back roads" that might be safer

and introducing even more cars to the area due to the various interchanges and ramps for to access the highways. All of this is to say that the State of Oregon does no favors to pedestrians and cyclists when they make large investments in car-centric infrastructure. I am not made safer by “improving traffic flows” through the Rose Quarter or across the Columbia River. A safer transportation network is only achieved by building robust and separated paths for both pedestrians and cyclists and by dramatically slowing down motor vehicle traffic where conflicts must occur. If safety for all is the goal, the additional hundreds of millions of dollars Oregon plans to spend on new interchanges and lanes in the heart of Portland would be much better spent on helping local communities build those safe networks for vulnerable road users and, sometimes, even removing lanes and interchanges where no workable safe solution exists.

This of course goes beyond safety, though, which is why I was heartened to see this clause written into the bill as well, “Whereas the Legislative Assembly and the Oregon Transportation Commission should consider ... equity across road users and safety when implementing a tolling program and establishing tolling rates.” I am in full agreement with this sentiment, as we should be sure that we are not imposing too heavy a burden for the people to bear when we build these large infrastructure projects. Unfortunately, this is yet another area where the Rose Quarter and IBRP Projects fall short of the mark. The State proposes tolling in order to control congestion and help pay for the projects, however, does nothing at all to ensure that reasonable alternatives will be available to people who cannot afford the cost of those tolls but must still find some way to get to work or perform their errands every day. Trimet has suggested that they will look into providing more frequent service to areas affected by tolling, but has not given any specific details and appears to be entirely absent from the conversation with ODOT and the Legislature, indicating that there will be little to no opportunity to coordinate efforts. Some have suggested providing some kind of toll waiver for those too impoverished to pay, but that will only serve to undermine the toll’s purpose in the first place. Even beyond tolling, the focus on building car-centric infrastructure has negative equity effects on much of the population. If you think tolling is a regressive form of taxation, wait until you hear how much it costs to buy, own, and operate a car as a person living near or below the poverty line. The time burden of substandard transit networks has a negative effect on those people who cannot get around any other way. Many disabled people, myself included, often find it difficult or impossible to operate or even sit in a car. Equity means affording the ability and choice for people to access the services they need, including in transportation. If the State has a true goal of equitable access to transportation, it is not furthered by spending hundreds of millions of dollars to shave a few minutes off of the drive times of people crossing the Columbia River or

through the Rose Quarter. Rather, more robust options to get around that don't revolve around owning, operating, maintaining, and storing a car should be the focus of that investment.

Another clause that caught my eye was this, "Whereas maintaining the balance between cost responsibility of light and heavy vehicles is essential to ... ensuring that the state's transportation system remains financially sustainable." It was notable to me because, as I'm sure the committee is well aware, road upkeep is quite expensive. It's also a common trope of highway projects that all of the focus tends to be on the up front price tag, while little to no attention is paid to the marginal increases to operations and maintenance of the new highway. I challenge this committee to ask the same follow up questions I do as an asset manager when they consider spending money on a capital investment: what are we signing ourselves up for for the next 10, 20, 50, 100 years? What is the opportunity cost for maintaining those additional highway miles supporting those additional vehicle miles traveled in terms of buses and metro lines, affordable housing, teachers and classrooms, or even reduced taxes? As yet, that question remains unanswered because nobody in a position of authority has even thought to ask it, which is the governmental equivalent of buying a new boat with your tax refund without thinking about moorage fees, registration, and maintenance.

Finally and, I think, most urgently, is the question of climate change. The current draft of the bill states, "Whereas it is the goal for the State of Oregon that ... mobility improvements reduce greenhouse gas emissions from the transportation sector." This is a blatant attempt at greenwashing these projects in an attempt to convince the public that adding more lanes to freeways will somehow prompt people to drive less. Again, I'll point the committee to the examples of LA and Houston, among others, who would be leading the charge against climate change if that were truly the case. That's such an inane stance that it's honestly personally insulting to me. It would be similar to saying that if I built an addition to my house I wouldn't be tempted to fill it with home goods, or that a new park wouldn't encourage people to spend more time outside or a new social media app wouldn't encourage people to share more photos of their cats dressed as the cast of Star Wars. The fact of the matter is that a brief reprieve in traffic congestion achieved by adding more highway capacity will simply encourage people to drive farther and more frequently, belching greenhouse gasses from their tailpipes or from their battery factory smokestacks. If the goal is to mitigate climate change, highway expansion will only work against it. It is better instead to develop a safe way to keep the same travel lanes that already exist and also build out more efficient, climate-friendly transportation solutions as an alternative.

In sum, while the goals of this legislation are laudable, the execution leaves much to be desired from the people of Oregon. I would like to propose to the members of the Legislative Assembly and any other elected official in Oregon a set of simple principles for casting their votes and signing their orders when they consider the path forward for the Rose Quarter, the IBRP, and any other topic that comes before them. No vote they cast should impoverish the people of Oregon. No vote they cast should endanger their health. No vote they cast should go backwards on the fight against climate change and increase the amount of greenhouse gasses we emit.