

TO: Joint Committee on Transportation, Oregon Legislature 2024 Session  
FROM: Douglas R. Allen  
SUBJECT: SB 1572 - Testimony  
DATE: February 13, 2023

Co-Chairs Gorsek and McLain; Vice-Chairs Boquist and Boshart Davis; Members of the Committee:

I offer the following points in support of HB 2662 (WES extension study):

1. Currently, Amtrak operates three daily round trip passenger trains between Portland Union Station and Salem. Two of them (“Cascades”) continue to Eugene, and the “Coast Starlight” continues to Los Angeles. Considering travel to Union Station, this service is neither conveniently fast nor frequent enough for those traveling between Washington County and Salem. Frequent, direct service is necessary for attracting riders on relatively short distance trips.

2. Amtrak service uses Union Pacific Railroad tracks. Union Pacific is one of two “Class 1” railroads serving the western United States. UP operates frequent long freight trains, imposing constraints on additional service. In contrast, WES operates over Portland & Western tracks. P&W operates locally in Oregon, with shorter, less frequent freight trains on the former “Oregon Electric” tracks that an extended WES service would use between Beaverton and Salem.

The “Oregon Electric” track between Wilsonville and Salem is under-utilized and could accommodate an attractive passenger service. Much of the right-of-way is owned by the State of Oregon, and the current freight operator, P&W, has proven experience operating the existing WES passenger service.

3. This is an opportunity to better-utilize existing WES infrastructure. WES now operates infrequently, only during weekday rush hours, so it is expensive on a per-rider basis, even though it offers a quick trip between Beaverton and Wilsonville. Adding service to WES, and extending some trips to Salem, will make the entire operation much more attractive and useful and could help relieve I-5 congestion. Increased ridership will make the service more cost-effective.

4. WES is not ultra high-speed rail, nor is it competition for the Amtrak Cascades service to Eugene. WES trains could have additional stops at Donald, Woodburn, and Keizer. Washington County travelers to Salem would avoid a trip to Union Station or Oregon City to catch Amtrak. WES would operate more frequently than the long-distance Amtrak service, and could have a cheaper cost structure than Amtrak service, with locally managed operation and locally maintained equipment.

5. The transit agencies serving Wilsonville (SMART) and Salem/Keizer (Cherriots) jointly operate bus service on I-5. The current transfer between bus and WES trains in Wilsonville is a disincentive to travel between Salem and Washington County. A continuous train trip between Salem and Beaverton would be more reliable and attractive, with connections in Beaverton to frequent MAX light rail service to western Washington County and the entire Portland region. A non-freeway trip on rail will be more reliable than the bus service it replaces, and may be faster, even with intermediate stops.

6. Extending WES to Salem was studied in 2009 by HDR Engineering, at the time WES was opened. The tracks, structures, and current freight service have also been studied as part of the high-speed rail corridor Tier 1 environmental analysis done by the Federal Railroad Administration, which ultimately selected the Union Pacific tracks for Amtrak Cascades expansion. Much of the technical work has already been done.

7. In recent years, the Class 1 railroads have been operating longer trains that do not fit on their sidings, making it much more difficult to increase frequency of passenger trains. It would be difficult and costly to add commuter train frequencies to the Cascades route. The OE route has fewer, shorter freight trains, offering greater flexibility for the type of frequent passenger service required to attract riders on a relatively short distance route.

8. Opportunities exist for terminating the WES extension at the Salem Amtrak station, and the study mandated by this bill should clarify whether that makes sense. It may also make sense to electrify the route, and operate some segments at higher speeds, which may be easier to do given the lower level of freight traffic on the Oregon Electric route. An Amtrak connection could extend the usefulness to longer trips from Washington County to Albany, Eugene, Klamath Falls, and beyond to California.

9. The study committee that this bill sets up will have every incentive to ensure that the service is planned to operate efficiently, cost-effectively, and safely. If the study demonstrates that extending WES makes sense, implementing legislation could be part of a 2025 transportation vision.

10. The study will hopefully identify federal funding opportunities and provide supporting information for competitive grant applications and justification for future State of Oregon investments.

Sincerely,

Douglas R. Allen, Portland Area Vice President

AORTA-Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates

The above testimony is my own opinion, not an official position of AORTA.