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On Behalf Of:
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Topic:

It's been a troubling path from passage of HB-2017 to the where we are today. Immediately after my 2017 testimony, we heard there were accountability measures in place, and that history would not be repeated. The claims proved to be untrue.

Innocuous language in HB-2017 authorized "Value Pricing", a term for the plan to charge tolls on existing highways and spend the money primarily on transit. I was one of many who resisted the tolling scheme after it was introduced in 2018. We were appalled at the lack of public awareness and involvement. At the time an ODOT spokesperson claimed that "tolling is about changing behavior."

As the process moved forward it became clear the plan was regressive, and would hurt working families the hardest. ODOT responded by making "Equity" the number one priority for tolling. There was never equity in the plan, nor did adequate public involvement occur prior to the Governor pausing the scheme in 2023.

Meanwhile, the Rose Quarter Congestion relief project, also authorized in HB-2017, was "hijacked" in an effort to include a lengthy cap over the freeway that would provide redevelopment in the neighborhood. After delays and inflation the cost ballooned to an untenable amount. Other projects, including the Abernathy Bridge, experienced similar outcomes.

Prior to 2024 ODOT knew that expected revenue was not coming. The rejection of tolling and inflation created a big financial hole. In spite of the situation, ODOT continued spending as if the money would somehow appear. The hole kept getting deeper until a February 26th Committee meeting when ODOT announce a \$1.1 billion shortfall. It was a stunning announcement that should have occurred prior to the start of the session.

The current \$5.6 billion proposal is a downsized version of HB-2025. Like HB-2017, it has "accountability measures" that fail to address the need for a big change in the priorities and culture that has failed us.

Although tolling is no longer a major consideration, another "poison pill" has been inserted in the language: Authorization for ODOT to raise the gas tax without Legislative approval. It's an invitation to abuse by an entity that has destroyed its own credibility. The new proposal features an unjustified gas tax increase, and a misplaced focus on changing our behavior.

It seems we are caught in a losing game of poker. A recent news article noted that ODOT has a \$300 million shortfall. That doesn't justify approval of the current \$5.6 billion proposal. While challenging, I encourage Legislators to not bow to the constant pressure being applied by various interests, and vote in opposition to the Special Session bill.

Les Poole