



**Testimony by City of Wilsonville Mayor Shawn O’Neil Supporting HB 3453:**

***Legislation Provides Opportunity to Improve I-5 Commuting Between Portland Metro Area–North Willamette Valley With Reliable High-Capacity Transit Option***

Scheduled for public hearing on March 11, 2025, before  
the Joint Committee On Transportation

Co-Chairs Gorsek and McLain, Vice-Chairs Starr and Boshart Davis, and Members of the Committee:

I am testifying in strong support of HB 3453, bipartisan legislation that creates the Westside Express Service Authority to assume operational responsibility of WES from TriMet.

The City of Wilsonville operates the award-winning South Metro Area Regional Transit (SMART) agency, which collaborates with the Salem Area Mass Transit District (“Cherriots”) to share the Monday through Friday commuter “1X Express” bus route on I-5 between Wilsonville and Salem. SMART buses meet each WES train arriving in Wilsonville to provide last-mile connections to local-area employers. SMART also provides regular fixed-route transit service within Wilsonville, and to Canby and Tualatin, and also plans new service to Oregon City and Woodburn starting in 2025.

HB 3453 provides the opportunity to improve I-5 commuting and mobility options between the Portland Metro Area and the North Willamette Valley Salem/Keizer Metro Area with a reliable high-capacity public-transit alternative with multiple benefits:

- **Increasing population of Portland metro and North Willamette Valley region needs mobility options**, especially for working commuters, students and seniors, many of whom require transportation for jobs, education and medical appointments.
- **I-5 traffic congestion continues to worsen** and potential tolling of I-205 and I-5 in Portland metro area requires a reliable public-transit alternative unaffected by highway traffic congestion and tolls.
- **Additional Federal Transit Administration (FTA) support for high-capacity transit** WES commuter rail service connecting METRO and SKATS—two federally-designated Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) Transportation Management Areas (TMAs)—that can increase ridership and supporting revenue.

- **Transit commuting and shopping option supports economic-development efforts** of North Willamette Valley communities that seek to expand job opportunities and access to medical appointments for residents.
- **Use of former Oregon Electric Railway line**, now owned by Portland & Western and BNSF Railroads both of which support prospective WES extension, that operated from 1908 to 1933.

As traffic congestion on the South Portland Metro and North Willamette Valley I-5 corridor continues to worsen, commuting workers, shoppers and elderly constituents with medical appointments would welcome a public-transit alternative unaffected by ever increasing I-5 highway traffic congestion. As a commuter train, WES is unimpeded by highway traffic congestion, offering the potential for a reliable transportation option that connects two major metro areas.

**The City believes that the WES study of a potential extension provides the state an opportunity to leverage substantial Federal Transit Administration (FTA) funds for commuter rail service connecting the Portland METRO and Salem-Keizer SKATS—two Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) Transportation Management Areas (TMAs)—and that can increase greatly WES ridership.**

The primary reason that WES has failed to live-up to ridership targets is that WES currently only operates with a limited schedule and acts only as inter-city suburban connector for Beaverton, Tigard, Tualatin and Wilsonville. **Connecting the greater Portland and Salem/Keizer metro areas offers the opportunity to greatly enhance ridership and supporting revenue generation.**

**Twice in the past two years members of the bipartisan Joint Committee on Transportation voted unanimously in support of proposed legislation that would have directed the Oregon Department of Transportation to undertake a study of extending WES from Wilsonville to Salem: [SB 1572](#) in 2024 and [HB 2662](#) in 2023.**

SB 1572 enjoyed considerable support from a wide range of constituencies, including 27 legislators as co-sponsors, local governments along the line, transit agencies, associations and community nonprofits. Specifically, the 2024 Portland–Salem/Keizer Metro Areas WES I-5 Commuter Rail Extension Study Coalition included all of the cities along the route and other stakeholders, including:

- The cities of Aurora, Beaverton, Donald, Hubbard, Keizer, Salem, Tualatin, Tigard, Wilsonville and Woodburn;

- Transit agencies and intergovernmental organizations including the Mid-Willamette Valley Council of Governments (MWW COG), Salem Area Mass Transit District (“Cherriots”), SMART (South Metro Area Regional Transit) and Yamhill County Transit;
- Associations that include the Metropolitan Mayors’ Consortium and Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates;
- Organizations that include 1000 Friends of Oregon and Travel Salem; and
- The railroads operating along the line, including Portland & Western and BNSF.

Proposals to generate highway revenue by tolling I-5 and I-205 in the Portland metro region raises equity issues of impacts to low-income populations of potential tolls to North Willamette Valley commuters. The lack of sufficient reliable, public-transit commute options along I-5 from Salem/Keizer to Portland area makes a non-highway mobility option like WES more attractive.

The City appreciates your consideration and urges a Do-Pass vote on HB 3453 with a referral to Ways and Means. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Shawn O’Neil, Mayor  
City of Wilsonville

Enclosure:

Article – “Panel hears support for Wilsonville-Salem commuter rail study,” Portland Tribune, Feb 14, 2024

“Support SB 1572 – ODOT Study Connecting Portland Metro-Area WES Commuter Train to Salem/Keizer Metro, Extending from Wilsonville to Salem,” Portland–Salem/Keizer Metro Areas WES I-5 Commuter Rail Extension Study Coalition, Feb 9, 2024

# Panel hears support for Wilsonville-Salem commuter rail study

By Peter Wong, Portland Tribune

Feb 14, 2024 10 hrs ago

[https://www.portlandtribune.com/news/panel-hears-support-for-wilsonville-salem-commuter-rail-study/article\\_823c06c0-cb82-11ee-b447-3fc167679c48.html?utm\\_medium=social&utm\\_source=email&utm\\_campaign=user-share](https://www.portlandtribune.com/news/panel-hears-support-for-wilsonville-salem-commuter-rail-study/article_823c06c0-cb82-11ee-b447-3fc167679c48.html?utm_medium=social&utm_source=email&utm_campaign=user-share)



Testifying at a Feb. 13 hearing of the Oregon Legislature's Joint Committee on Transportation are from left Dwight Brashear, transit director for South Metro Area Regional Transit (SMART), based in Wilsonville; Miles Pengilly, representing TriMet, and Maria Hinojos Pressey, president of the Salem Area Mass Transit District board. PMG PHOTO: PETER WONG



Testifying for a proposed study of Wilsonville-Salem commuter rail are from left Sen. Aaron Woods, D-Wilsonville; Rep. Courtney Neron, D-Wilsonville, and Rep. Kevin Mannix, R-Salem. They spoke Feb. 13 at a hearing of the Oregon Legislature's Joint Committee on Transportation on Senate Bill 1572. Woods and Mannix sit on the panel. Woods is chief sponsor and the others co-sponsors. PMG PHOTO: PETER WONG

A study of commuter rail service between Wilsonville and Salem is not a new idea.

But unlike a proposal more than a decade ago — and another that was left behind in last year's session — the latest legislation for a study drew an overwhelming response from lawmakers, city and transit officials, and other advocates who testified Tuesday, Feb. 13, to the Oregon Legislature's Joint Committee on Transportation.

The earlier proposal was sponsored by then-Rep. Mitch Greenlick, a Democrat from Portland who died in 2020 after 17 years in the House and made a study a pet project. It led to a broad analysis completed in 2010 by the Oregon Department of Transportation.

A proposal for a more detailed study in House Bill 2662 cleared the joint committee in the 2023 session. But it died in the Legislature's budget committee.

Now, as lawmakers gear up for 2025 — when they will consider Oregon's next major round of transportation projects and funding for a decade — the idea has renewed political momentum in the current short session due to close by March 10.

Sen. Aaron Woods, a Democrat from Wilsonville, is the chief sponsor of Senate Bill 1572, which calls for the more detailed study by ODOT. Woods was elected in 2022 from a newly redrawn district that has seen population growth and more jobs.

“However, we have seen the congestion it has caused on Interstate 5, impacting our air quality and extending our daily commutes and taking precious hours from our lives,” Woods, who also sits on the joint committee, said to open the hearing. “Extending the WES commuter train is our chance to change that narrative. It is about making our community a place where public transport isn't just an option, but a preference.”

His reference was to the Westside Express Service (WES), which TriMet operates on Portland & Western tracks between Wilsonville and Beaverton, but only during peak morning and evening

hours Monday through Friday. The service began in 2009 after a decade of planning and construction.

Two other chief sponsors are Republican Reps. Kevin Mannix of Salem and Democratic Rep. Courtney Neron of Wilsonville, who also sponsored the failed effort in 2023. Mannix also sits on the joint committee.

“I wish I could say it was my idea, but I can’t,” Mannix said. “They have put together a coalition of all these communities along the line that are looking toward a vision of a commuter line with a number of stations where people will be able to get on board and off from Wilsonville down to Salem. I would hope that later, we could consider the further extension of this line from Salem to Eugene.”

Neron added: “I hope you will do this again so we can finish this unfinished business in this short session... This bill is an opportunity to mitigate increased congestion and carbon emissions.”

### **Broader study planned**

What may be the difference this time, as opposed to last year, is that Sen. Chris Gorsek, a Democrat from Gresham and co-chair of the joint committee, wants to include this study as part of a broader look at underused rail corridors in the Portland metropolitan area. He said Metro, the regional planning agency, has agreed to undertake it — if it can get \$500,000. The Wilsonville-Salem commuter rail study also is proposed at \$500,000.

“We need to think big about transportation in Oregon, especially rail transportation,” Gorsek said at the close of the Feb. 13 hearing.

The House co-chair is Rep. Susan McLain, a Democrat from Forest Grove, who said of new projects generally: “We have to consider what is adequate funding to do big things.”

The committee heard from three mayors: Cathy Clark of Keizer, Frank Lonergan of Woodburn, and Brian Asher of Aurora, although the nearest stop to Aurora on the proposed extension is Donald. Wilsonville Mayor Julie Fitzgerald filed a statement, as did Salem Mayor Chris Hoy.

Dwight Brashear is transit director for South Metro Area Regional Transit (SMART) in Wilsonville, the southern terminus of the current WES commuter rail. From there, SMART and Cherriots, the bus service run by the Salem Area Mass Transit District, operate express bus service between the cities.

“With this project, I think they can call their cities America’s finest cities,” Brashear said of the mayors’ testimony. “This is a great project and I stand in full support of it. Is it going to be hard? Sure, but anything worth anything is hard.”

Maria Hinojos Pressey, president of the Salem transit district board, also endorsed the study.

### **Other support**

Most of the rail corridors proposed for the broader study, as well as the Wilsonville-Beaverton line, are owned by the Portland & Western Railroad — acquired in 1995 by Genesee & Wyoming, a railroad holding company. Ross Lane, an assistant vice president, testified in favor of the study. He said rail has less impact on climate change than trucking.

“It reduces greenhouse gases associated with freight transportation,” he said via video link. “But put simply, a new passenger rail service must not compromise our ability to safely and efficiently deliver freight for our customers.”

Transportation and environmental advocates also support a detailed study of commuter rail.

“It takes trips off Interstate 5 and Highway 217,” said Bob Krebs, president of the Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates, and formerly with ODOT’s rail program. “Potentially it could serve more than 10% of the trips on both roads. It addresses equity issues by providing low-cost mobility for low-income people. It upgrades the existing infrastructure and takes advantage of latent capacity without impacting the taking of property off the tax rolls.”

Sam Diaz is executive director of 1000 Friends of Oregon, the citizen watchdog group founded by Tom McCall — the governor who signed Oregon’s land use planning law back in 1973 — and Portland lawyer Henry Richmond. “This kind of rail extension can honor the legacy of hard work that our farmers and farmworkers bring every day,” Diaz said, by protecting Willamette Valley farmland against further intrusion by potential highway expansion.

### **TriMet is neutral**

Although only a few statements were filed in opposition, and no one testified against it, TriMet is neutral on the bill.

Miles Pengilly, its manager for state government affairs, said TriMet cannot operate service outside the Portland metro area. He said the existing Wilsonville-Beaverton commuter rail relies on TriMet leasing the tracks from Portland & Western, limiting its hours of operation – and that it is a high-cost, low-ridership line compared with buses and the MAX light-rail system.

He also said TriMet’s priorities are improved bus service, particularly for low-income people and neighborhoods, and a proposed rapid-bus corridor for 82nd Avenue in Portland. A similar corridor opened in 2022 on Division Street, where buses run frequently to connect downtown Portland with Southeast Portland and Gresham. TriMet sponsored a bus tour on part of 82nd Avenue when U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg made a brief stop in Portland last summer.

TriMet also has proposed a new Southwest Corridor light-rail line from Portland through Tigard and Bridgeport Village in Tualatin, though voters rejected a 2020 measure for the local share required to match federal money for the line.

# Support SB 1572 – ODOT Study Connecting Portland Metro-Area WES Commuter Train to Salem/Keizer Metro, Extending from Wilsonville to Salem

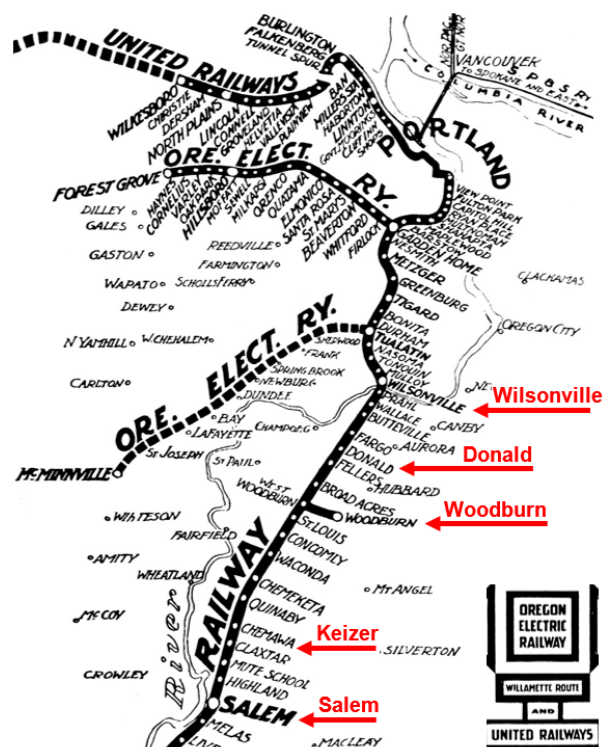
Portland–Salem/Keizer Metro Areas WES I-5 Commuter Rail Extension Study Coalition

With 27 legislators as co-sponsors, SB 1572 is a bipartisan, bicameral legislative concept to advance high-capacity transit option for Oregonians and visitors.

SB 1572 creates a multi-organizational task force—the Westside Express Advisory Committee—composed of local governments, transit agencies, railroads and public-interest groups to study extending the current rush-hour-only Westside Express Service (WES) commuter train from the current southern terminus in Wilsonville for 31 miles to Salem, with stops in Donald, Woodburn and Keizer. The bill calls for ODOT to report back to the legislature in December 2024 with study findings and recommendations. A similar bill during the 2023 session, HB 2662, passed unanimously by the Joint Committee on Transportation.

- **Increasing population** of Portland metro and North Willamette Valley region needs mobility options, especially for commuters and seniors, many who require transportation for jobs, education and medical appointments.
- **I-5 traffic congestion continues to worsen** and prospective ODOT tolling of I-205 and I-5 in Portland metro area requires a reliable public-transit alternative unaffected by highway traffic congestion and tolls.
- **Additional Federal Transit Administration (FTA) support** for high-capacity transit WES commuter rail service connecting METRO and SKATS—two federally-designated Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) Transportation Management Areas (TMAs)—that can increase ridership.
- **Transit commuting and shopping option supports economic-development efforts** of North Willamette Valley communities.
- **Use of former Oregon Electric Railway line**, now owned by Portland & Western and BNSF Railroads, which support the WES extension study, that operated 1908 – 1933.

- **SB 1572 is supported** by the Cities of Aurora, Beaverton, Donald, Hubbard, Keizer, Salem, Tualatin, Tigard, Wilsonville and Woodburn; Metropolitan Mayors’ Consortium; Mid-Willamette Valley Council of Governments; Salem Area Mass Transit District (“Cherriots”), SMART (South Metro Area Regional Transit) and Yamhill County Transit; 1000 Friends of Oregon; Association of Oregon Rail and Transit Advocates, Travel Salem; and the railroads.



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