

Vanishing Lifelines

Rural Oregonians rely on transit to stay connected to community, but intercity routes are disappearing.



The view from the window of the Coast Starlight. Photo by the author.

By Meg Wade

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The sun has set, and the forest edging Oregon Route 140 is unrecognizable in the dark. I'm one of a dozen bundled passengers in the shuttle bus rattling along the icy road, a folded wheelchair lift clanging at the rear. Wind-driven lines of snow shine in the headlights. Just past a yellow road sign reading "soft shoulder," an oversized truck with massive tires has slid halfway into a ditch. We inch around the attending police cruiser and continue our slow and steady journey to Klamath Falls.

When we arrive, I mind my step as I walk through slush, ice, and newly fallen snow. There are no sidewalks on the blocks near the train station, where the shuttle bus drops us off, but the street is wide and the cars give me and my luggage plenty of space. I make it to the closest motel without incident.

Over the next several days, I will cross the snowy Cascades not once but four times. I will stay two separate nights in a bare-bones motel. The motel feels safe enough—its prominent location, its brightly lit exterior, its friendly proprietor. But it also features all the stereotypes of its genre: chipped bathtubs, stains on the sheets, and, despite the clear non-smoking signs, a cigarette stench that will linger on my clothes for days.

I have no business being in Klamath Falls—and not just during a week in which it has received over a foot of snow. All I'm trying to do is travel from Ashland, where I live, to Corvallis. It just so happens that I'm trying to do so without a car.

Two hundred and twenty-two miles separate Ashland and Corvallis, and it takes under four hours to drive the most direct route. Yet by public transit, the trip will take me about twenty-four hours each way.

Less than a year ago, one could book a Greyhound ticket out of Medford, and not so many hours later be in Eugene or downtown Corvallis or Portland. Yes, Greyhound trips have their own difficulties and indignities—gas station “dinner” stops, or the occasional unscheduled wait to let the engine cool down in the heat of summer—but this very line had taken me reliably between the Rogue and Willamette valleys for a number of years. It had even facilitated my initial move to Ashland: after I signed the lease on an apartment, a friend and I rode the Greyhound up to Portland together, to retrieve the life I had stuffed away in a storage unit, and then he drove a U-Haul back down, a task for which my perennially bus-riding self was not well-suited.

But sometime in 2024, the situation changed. Greyhound service had already been cut down from twice daily to a single run. Then, mysteriously, one could no longer book a ticket out of Medford.

Every rider I've talked with has a different impression of when this happened, based on the last time they tried to purchase a ticket, but couldn't, and found themselves scrambling to readjust their plans. Was it last August? Or as early as last spring? Did they cut the line partially, running only a few days a week, before phasing it out completely? The lack of public announcements, the absence of news coverage, left riders in the dark and unsure if the change was temporary or permanent. For many of us, it felt like the route just vanished. My

contact at POINT, a program within the Oregon Department of Transportation that helps coordinate intercity transit in the state, tells me that Flix, the new owner of Greyhound, cut service in fall of 2024, but doesn't give me a more specific date.

As it happens, the line didn't exactly disappear: Flix/Greyhound still runs that same bus along I-5, but no longer makes stops between Redding and Eugene. It also no longer goes to Corvallis. When I needed to travel to Portland, I remember begrudging the OSU students who'd board in Corvallis for the extra time added onto my commute, but now I wonder how they're getting home. Where once an affordable form of public transit connected communities all along the I-5 corridor, now, from Southern Oregon, there's nothing. Well, there's this: the Pacific Crest Bus line shuttle to Klamath Falls, which comes in the evening, followed by the Amtrak Coast Starlight, which comes through early the next morning, and takes one back over the mountains and further north.

If I were heading to Portland, the Starlight would get me there. To reach Corvallis, though, I have to get off in Albany and wait for one of the Linn-Benton County buses. I'll repeat the whole trip in reverse to go home, complete with an initial local bus ride and walking the last mile to my house—uphill on my way out, downhill on my way back. In a culture that seems hellbent on prioritizing convenience at the cost of all else, the powers guiding transit development have somehow made it anything but, especially outside of major cities.

A lot of people don't think transit riders really exist outside of big cities. When I first arrived in the Rogue Valley, sans car, my commute to Ashland from a house-sitting gig in nearby Talent perplexed at least one of the managers at the small store where I had picked up a part-time job. "There's a bus?" she asked. Indeed, there's a bus—every twenty minutes, right through the center of town. "Yes, the bus that runs right past the front of the store," I said. She just blinked, still puzzled.

Given such attitudes, it's no wonder those who do use small-town transit have difficulty finding the information they need. And the bus-train combo heading first towards Eastern Oregon is not the most intuitive option for a person trying to get to Portland or anywhere else in the northern half of the state.

On my trip to Corvallis, my seatmate on the northbound Starlight is aghast at the notion of not having transit as an option. She's a Klamath Falls preschool teacher on the edge of retirement, heading to see her son, and there's no way she'd be able to make the drive by car, she says—it's just too dangerous.

"We'd be trapped in the winter," she tells me, without the train. "It's a lifeline," she says.

I start thinking about the teacher's use of the word *lifeline*—how transit, be it bus or train, helps people maintain relationships and livelihoods when they can't afford to drive or have other reasons that prohibit driving as an option. Transit literally keeps people alive in conditions where other modes of transport are more likely to fail.

If I'd made a few phone calls, I'm certain I could have figured out carpooling for this particular trip. But my mind was filled with images of stranded vehicles from the last week of snow. Indeed, on the bus from Medford, people were already buzzing with news about the 100-car pileup outside Portland. A closed interstate, a car in flames. No one knew the injury count. I tightened my seatbelt, happy to leave the driving to a trained professional. The driver announces in advance that the snowy conditions mean we'll be later than the usual arrival time, but she'll make sure we get there safely.

Waiting beforehand at the bus stop on the Southern Oregon University campus, I meet a student who is taking transit precisely for that additional bit of promised safety. He's holding a bouquet of roses and carnations. It's Valentine's Day, and he's heading to see his girlfriend at Oregon Institute of Technology. He had planned on driving, he says, but his parents talked him out of it and suggested the bus. I'll remember this when we see the foolhardy truck driver in the ditch. That kid is lucky to have parents like that, I'll think.

I may not be heading to a romantic weekend getaway, but I am going to something that is, for me, just as important: two and a half days of community, music, and dancing in the middle of a gray and dreary February.

Back in November, when early evening began to feel like midnight and I remembered the seasonal depression of winters past, I made a plan. I registered for a weekend of contra dancing, where I'd see friends and familiar faces from around the region all packed into a warm and colorful hall and spinning to fiddle tunes. I would go and ground myself in movement and connection, I thought. I would be infused with joy at the point in the year when the holidays are long past and spring still feels like a distant impossibility. I would go and feel alive.

For me, this is worth the risk of winter travel. Connection to friends, family, and community is a real source of hope, not just in the midst of February's gloom but through all the ups and downs of everyday life. And the structures we create to maintain those connections across distance are indeed lifelines.

As with much of our public infrastructure, though, we seem intent on wearing down the systems relied upon by lower income folks until they're so threadbare they break. Intercity bus service is a prime example. I am told by a chat agent at Greyhound that the stop in Medford was removed because of "lack of demand," which in no way matches my experience

of the line formed at the Front St. station or of packed rides up to Portland. In the name of earning a buck, they've broken a frail but fundamental transit connection here in Oregon. And Southern Oregon isn't the only community losing out from Flix's post-acquisition decisions: They have cut other routes across the state and closed bus stations around the country, literally leaving riders out in the cold.

During the weekend in Corvallis, I make a new friend who also relied on transit to get there. But he lives in Seattle, and given the direct and frequent service on Amtrak's Cascade line, his trip is fast and easy in comparison to mine. He texts me after he arrives home, at which point I am still at the Albany station, waiting for the southbound Starlight. Its schedule—the train is due at 4:15 p.m.—means I've whiled away most of a day waiting around in coffee shops. While I continue to wait, I look up each trip on Google Maps. The distances are similar, but my route home takes almost four times as long.

My Seattle friend and I both technically have the capacity to drive, if we want to. But many of the others waiting with me for the Coast Starlight do not. Riding Amtrak is a good reminder that driving is not an option for everyone, regardless of income. It's easy to spot canes and walkers on the train platform, and I notice an older woman whose hands shake. And then there are those whose disabilities are less visible: At a coffee shop in downtown Albany, I meet a man named Douglas, visiting from a small town further east to receive treatment for sudden and acute narcolepsy. When we part ways, I search the internet for stats on narcolepsy, and I'm surprised to learn that as many as one in two thousand people deal with the disorder. That means there are a couple thousand folks with narcolepsy in Oregon alone, and it's only one of many disabilities preventing someone from driving.

Douglas isn't the only person I meet over the weekend who is happy to agree with me about the necessity of transit connections between small towns. A woman from Yachats who helps young people enter job training programs around the state is excited to have a sympathetic ear so she can rant about how they have to fly some of their participants because transit connections are too difficult. A student from outside Cave Junction tells me about choosing to go to a college outside Portland and now rethinking their decision to attend, as car ownership hadn't figured into their original financial calculations.

Then, on my way home—heading over the mountains one last time, from Klamath Falls down to Medford—I meet one more person who demonstrates just how much a transit connection can mean for an individual. D. has just finished a ten-year prison sentence for what he describes as a drunken bar fight gone too far. "Alcohol is bad," he states flatly after finishing the story.

We exchange names and a handshake when I ask him to watch my bags while I duck into the station to use the restroom before we board. My quick read on him is that he's attentive, alert, and headed in the same direction. When I return, I hear him telling the driver that he's waiting for me before he boards. Later, on the bus, he shares his backstory and his hopes for the future. He tells me about everything he's done on the inside to try and prepare himself for his release and to get back on track with his life. He is headed to Grants Pass, the place that he calls home, though there is no house or person waiting for him, and I gather that he might be sleeping rough. Everything he owns is in a tiny blue daypack. I give him an emergency set of handwarmers I have stashed in my own bag, and lament that at this point I am mostly carrying around unwashed laundry and don't have a lot else to offer. D. accepts the handwarmers. He seems undeterred, laser-focused on finding a job, any job, before starting a business using skills from his career before prison.

Given his circumstances, it probably goes without saying that D. doesn't own a car. The only thing available to help carry him back to some semblance of a life is this small bus. I wonder what he would have done, where he would go, without it.

A few weeks after my trip, I receive welcome news: Pacific Crest Bus Lines, the same company that runs the bus to Klamath Falls, is in progress on plans for a new route connecting Medford and Eugene. The seven-day-a-week service will stop in communities Greyhound previously passed by, like Creswell and Sutherlin.

But the launch date isn't finalized. "Later this year" is all I'm told. Once again, riders are short on information, and dependent on the whim of a private company that could, down the road, decide to cut its losses.

Will we get the new bus route? Will the current ones keep running? Will we be able to keep riding, to stay connected to community or a sense of home? Or will we see all these lifelines cut and wiped away?

I'm sitting at the bus stop, waiting to find out.

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