

Testimony to Senate Committee on Transportation

Rob Zako, Ph.D.

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Chair Gorsek, Vice-Chair Weber, and members of the Committee, thank you for this opportunity to present to you.

My name is Rob Zako. I am the [executive director](#) for Better Eugene-Springfield Transportation and a member of the [Steering Committee](#) for Move Oregon Forward.

But today I am speaking with you more as a former faculty member in the School of Planning, Public Policy, and Management at the University of Oregon.

A decade ago, I led a research project assessing the “[Effectiveness of Transportation Funding Mechanisms for Achieving National, State and Metropolitan Economic, Health and Other Livability Goals](#).” At the time, federal, state, and local governments across the nation were spending about \$320 billion per year on transportation. My team wanted to understand what taxpayers were getting for those investments.

To get an answer, we looked at a diverse cross section of states that we expected were doing better than average: California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia. We looked at their goals, plans, policies, and investment programs. We assessed each state on its own terms: what they said they wanted to achieve and what they reported about their own successes and failures. And we tried to add up the numbers.

Alas, in the end we were unable to determine to what extent transportation investments were delivering value. Yes, we saw investments in many different projects and programs. But we did not discover *systematic* efforts to assess what outcomes transportation investments

delivered. Was the economy measurably better? Were public health and safety improved? Were travel times reduced? We simply could not tell.

Although we were not able to answer our original research question, we did publish “[Better Outcomes: Improving Accountability & Transparency in Transportation Decision-Making](#),” a toolkit of best practices we uncovered in the course of our research.

Last year, the Brookings Institution took a similar look at all fifty states. In “[Connecting the DOTs: A survey of state transportation planning, investment, and accountability practices](#),” their conclusions substantially aligned with ours:

1. States’ long-range plans include clear goals, but there’s little accountability for reaching those goals.
2. Most states do not publicly explain why they build specific projects, including whether those projects address their long-range plans.
3. On average, states share relatively small amounts of funding with local partners.
4. States make it difficult for the public to directly inform planning goals or evaluate which projects will be constructed.
5. Most states use independent commissions to support their department of transportation operations, but their governance structures and legal authority vary widely.

I offer four broad points from this larger body of research.

First, focus not solely on transportation funding but more importantly on the measurable *outcomes* you hope that funding will achieve. A road is not an end in itself but literally and figuratively a means to multiple ends.

Second, establish a transportation decision-making *system* involving key stakeholders that is designed to ensure that over time investments go

to the projects and programs that are most likely to achieve desired outcomes. Your challenge as legislators isn't necessarily to know what are the best investments but to ensure that those more involved are empowered to make good decisions on behalf of taxpayers.

Third, put in place mechanisms for *reporting back to taxpayers* how effective those investments have been. The people who pay need to know they are getting what collectively they see as most important.

Fourth, don't reinvent the wheel. Our toolkit and more recent research point to states that Oregon would do well to emulate. For example, Colorado, Minnesota, and Virginia offer good models.

In conclusion, the two bills before you are very much in line with best practices already working well in some other parts of the country.

Measure What We Drive ([Senate Bill 1542](#)) sets standards to ensure investments actually meet Oregon's transportation goals.

Guardrails for Good Governance ([Senate Bill 1543](#)) establishes oversight to improve how the agency manages its debt, budget, and projects.

Both bills include transparency measures to ensure we're showing that work to the public consistently and clearly so that taxpayers can see the progress their dollars are delivering.

We're asking for better results, not more money. By making sure every dollar is used efficiently, we can improve results while keeping the state's financial burden low.