Just like other cities

Until the late 1960s, Portland was just like other American cities its size. It grew up around a streetcar system, which then faded away as automobiles came to dominate urban transportation. Faced with low-cost, widespread auto use and starved of capital, transit declined rapidly. Aggressive highway building—as an outgrowth of the Interstate Highway program initiated in 1956—became the logical solution to the growing region's transportation needs.

Autos also frayed the fabric of the city. The grand Portland Hotel, completed in 1890, was demolished in 1951 to make way for a parking lot. In 1972, air pollution from cars in downtown Portland violated federal standards one day out of every three.

Transit in trouble

Meanwhile transit ridership continued to fall. From a high of 160 million rides during World War II, transit ridership fell to 16 million in 1969. That year, the Rose City Transit Company, facing bankruptcy, demanded a major fare hike and threatened to discontinue all service.

In response, the Oregon Legislature passed House Bill 1808 in 1969, allowing establishment of public transit and transportation systems. TriMet's board, created by this law, moved initially to establish a small transit district in the city and the Blue Lines in the suburbs, and to provide public transit service throughout the new district.

Re-thinking the transportation problem

In the early 1970s, the region and the state experienced a revolution in how they envisioned their future. In 1971, the Oregon Legislature set the stage with Senate Bill 100, establishing the country's first statewide land-
Investing in a livable city
By the late 1970s Portland had begun to transform as it embraced regional land use and transportation planning to promote and preserve its livability:
- In 1976, Portland replaced a four-lane downtown expressway with today's Waterfront Park.
- By 1977, the new Transit Mall on SW 5th and 6th avenues became the focus for downtown redevelopment, as envisioned in the Downtown Plan. The region studied transit options for the Banfield (Portland to Gresham) corridor, and light rail emerged as the preferred alternative over the bus transitway initially proposed.
- In 1981, the City of Portland rejected plans to build a 10-floor parking garage in the heart of downtown, ultimately choosing to construct Pioneer Courthouse Square—today often referred to as “Portland’s living room”—in response to community demand.

Beginning the light rail network
The Federal Aid Highway Act of 1973 made it possible for states to transfer funds from unneeded freeway projects to other transportation projects, including transit. In 1977, Oregon asked to transfer funding from the discontinued Mount Hood Freeway project to the Banfield Light Rail Project. Receiving federal approval in 1980, this landmark decision—brokered by the Mayor of Portland, the Governor and the head of the Oregon Transportation Commission—marked the beginning of a light rail network that has served as a catalyst and focal point for development throughout the region, and has emerged as the backbone for the regional public transit system.

Adopting a 50-year land use and transportation vision for the region
Affirming the region’s new direction in 1978, voters replaced CRAG with the Metropolitan Service District, now known as Metro. This new elected regional government was given expanded powers and responsibilities to plan for the region’s future. A year later Metro established the region’s Urban Growth Boundary (UGB) as required by the Statewide Planning Law to contain sprawl and provide cost-effective urban services and transportation within the boundary. By 1983 it had adopted a new Regional Transportation Plan to guide investments in the region’s transportation system.

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Downtown Portland focuses on transit for revival
Portland civic leaders seized the opportunity to refocus investment in the central city. The 1972 Downtown Plan declared Portland would first decide the kind of place it wanted to be and then invest in appropriate transportation infrastructure, rather than letting cars dictate urban form. It envisioned a walkable “24-hour downtown” with housing and abundant ground-floor retail to revive the central city.

The Plan established SW 5th and 6th avenues as the office and retail spine for downtown. It also designated 5th and 6th avenues as primarily transit streets for buses and the streets on either side of 5th and 6th as primarily auto access streets. This set the tone for development of a balanced regional transportation system.

Public transportation steps forward
By 1973, the newly-formed TriMet had completed an Immediate Action Plan and a 1990 Master Plan to reverse public transportation’s decline in the region. The plans supported concentrating transit service in downtown Portland on bus-only transit malls along S.W. 5th and 6th avenues and also recommended building a series of suburban park-and-ride lots to attract auto users to the bus system and developing transitways in major corridors to enhance bus service. Light rail is mentioned only briefly, but was not recommended for further consideration.

The move to a balanced transportation system
In May 1973, Governor Tom McCall appointed a task force to create a new transportation plan for the Portland region. Their groundbreaking 1975 Interim Transportation Plan said the region should scale back highway building to a handful of basic needs and develop a balanced transportation system that included a network of transitways in major travel corridors, focusing first on the Banfield Freeway corridor.

Equally important, the plan suggested future development and land use in the region should be tied to corresponding transportation development. Portland became the first major urban area in the U.S. to adopt such a philosophy.

In 1974, public opposition to the planned Mount Hood Freeway crested as studies showed how the project along the Powell Boulevard corridor would destroy southeast Portland and Gresham neighborhoods at a cost of over $400 million in 1972 dollars. That year, the Portland City Council and the Multnomah County Board officially rejected the project and began considering other ways of providing access in this east-west corridor—reflecting the region’s new approach to land use and transportation.

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