

TriMet Review of “Debunking Portland: The Public Transit Myth”

September 2007

In his recent paper, “Debunking Portland: The Public Transit Myth” dated August 28, 2007, posted on the Cato Institute web site, and cited in the media, Mr. O’Toole of the Cato Institute insists that the acclaim Portland continues to receive internationally for its common sense linkage between transportation and land use is based upon a myth. What he does not see is the exuberance and envy international visitors display when they see the scale of development in downtown Portland, the full MAX trains in the middle of the day or the scale and quality of development happening around MAX stations in places like Gresham and Hillsboro. They talk to representatives from the business community, they interview MAX riders and they experience first-hand the energy and enthusiasm for what is happening here. From Milwaukee, Wisconsin to Seoul, South Korea, other places look to Portland as a model for creating more livable communities.

Portland’s integration of transportation and land use planning gives the region a head start in addressing the symptoms of global warming, limited energy resources, population growth and shifting demographics. Transit may not be the panacea for growth and mobility challenges, but it is a cornerstone strategy for creating a balanced transportation system that supports lifestyle choices. The objective is not to cram more people onto buses and trains, but to provide alternatives to the automobile, which has already filled roadways, polluted the air and consumed precious land for parking lots. Lifestyle choices are increasingly based on trips that can be made locally – by walking, cycling or using local public transportation. The region has planned and built an integrated system of bus, light rail and streetcar, with each mode optimized for local or regional travel. Among transit investment choices, decision makers found light rail to best fit the land use and development needs of major corridors in the region. The goal was to develop a balanced transportation system that provides attractive travel options and has a positive influence on the quality of life in the region.

A Well Considered Decision that Started 55 Years Ago

Mr. O’Toole asserts that the Portland region is spending too much on public transit, diverting funds from other community needs. Thirty years ago a freeway cutting through Portland’s southeast neighborhoods would have had a major detrimental impact on neighborhoods. Officials replaced that project with a new Regional Transportation Plan, calling for no new freeway construction in the region and reconstruction of a deteriorated transit system.

For the past quarter century Portland area communities have been implementing this plan. The Portland region’s urban growth boundary, formed in 1979, grew only 1.2 percent, or 3,000 acres for 23 years up to November 2002, when an additional 18,000 acres were added. Light rail helps to support a compact urban area characterized by comparatively short trips and active community centers. Portland remains surrounded by pristine rural and forested areas. Municipalities have enacted comprehensive plans establishing urban centers along existing and planned fixed guideway transit routes and installed the infrastructure needed to support this land

use pattern. Road investments have been sized to complement these transit investments. The region is increasing attention to bike and pedestrian facilities that provide for local travel, safe routes to schools and access to transit. To ensure that the desired compact urban form was achieved, an urban growth boundary was established that preserved neighborhoods and promotes urban densities within regional and town centers. This has kept sprawl in check and protected valuable farm and forestland.

Community Response to Light Rail Transit

Mr. O'Toole reaches back 10 years to a complex series of ballot measures to conclude that Portlanders dislike light rail. Portland residents vote every day for light rail at the "farebox". Seventy percent of TriMet transit riders either have a car available that they left at home or don't have a car available because they prefer to use TriMet.

Contrary to Mr. O'Toole's assertion, the ridership growth has been sustained in spite of fare increases that were necessary to keep pace with rising fuel costs. TriMet's weekly ridership has increased for 18 consecutive years. Fiscal year 2007 annual ridership finished at 96.9 million trips. TriMet has added three new light rail lines over the last 10 years without any sacrifice of overall productivity. Light rail ridership is at an all time high of 110,300 weekday boarding rides or 34% of the total. Portlanders are not just using transit to avoid peak-hour congestion and parking charges. Saturday MAX ridership of 85,400 is 77% of the weekday total. The strength of light rail ridership has not been at the expense of persons riding the bus. Bus boarding riders per vehicle hour increased from 32 to 34 over the past 10 years.

Those statistics reflect public attitudes. A 2006 survey of 1,000 regional residents found that 85% of the public approves the MAX system (66% strongly approve, 19% somewhat approve) and only 8% disapprove. The bus system received similar statistics, with 51% strongly approving and 31% somewhat approving.

Between 1995 and 2005 overall ridership increased 53% with only a 20% increase in service. While transit remains a minority mode for travel, it is outpacing the 25% growth in vehicles miles of travel and the 16% growth in population over that same period of time. In almost every category, Portland's integrated transit system appears healthy and well used.

The Cost of Light Rail

Light rail transit does require a significant up-front investment of \$22 to \$60 million per mile, but it costs less to operate per passenger carried. Over time this cost-efficiency is critical. A light rail train carries 266 riders on average during the peak hours, with loads of up to 332 for some trains. A bus carries 51 riders comfortably or 64 under peak conditions. This five-fold capacity advantage means light rail costs less per passenger. For fiscal year 2007 average operating cost per boarding ride for all bus routes was \$2.66 or \$2.14 for the most productive 16 Frequent Service bus routes. This cost for MAX was \$1.48.

Portland's credibility in delivering well-used projects on time and on budget has leveraged an average of \$65 million annually in Federal transportation dollars over each of the past 15 years. Private funds have also been leveraged in the construction of Airport MAX and the Central City Streetcar. Investments in communities around light rail and streetcar far exceed the cost of those

projects. Every project, Eastside, Westside, Airport and Interstate, was completed on or ahead of schedule and within budget.

Light rail program cost summary

<u>Light Rail Project</u>	<u>Cost</u>	<u>Year Opened</u>	<u>Federal share</u>
Eastside	\$ 214 million	1986	83%
Westside	\$ 963 million	1998	73%
Airport	\$ 125 million	2001	0%
<u>Interstate</u>	<u>\$ 350 million</u>	2004	74%
Total	\$ 1.652 billion		

Rarely do funds for the construction and operation of light rail compete with core community needs. Federal transportation dollars cannot be spent on schools and designated transit dollars are not available for road projects. These funds would be spent in other cities if the Portland region did not compete for them. It is true that TriMet has stretched its resources and implemented aggressive management, maintenance and operating productivity measures to meet growing demands on transit. The community has benefited from that resourcefulness. TriMet has cut back on less productive bus routes and reallocated those resources for frequent bus routes that serve more riders.

Public transit is a safety net for thousands of residents and workers who cannot drive due to disabilities, age or income. It contributes to a healthy economy and quality of life for all residents. It increases the independence of mobility challenged population groups, which will only grow as the median age increases in the years ahead.

Transit investments complement the regional land use plan with its focus on corridors and centers – providing transportation options and reducing reliance on the automobile. Three quarters of area residents are within a 1/4-mile walking range of transit. A new life style has emerged in active, mixed-use communities allowing residents to reach more destinations by walking, cycling, or taking the streetcar or bus.

Light Rail and Streetcar Speeds

Mr. O'Toole suggests that light rail and streetcars are slow. Light rail's average speed of 19.3 miles per hour includes station stops, but light rail does not have to contend with delays due to accidents and congestion, signal cycles and the search for a parking space. For many trips, light rail is a faster, more reliable travel option. Light rail is an attractive travel option as it offers:

- Reliable operation, free delays due to traffic congestion and accidents,
- Permanence and predictability for the occasional rider,
- Relatively quiet operation and zero emissions,
- Wide doors, spacious interiors and the ability to read or relax,
- Smooth ride quality.

Portland's streetcar on the other hand is serving short trips, making speed of minor importance. The streetcar like light rail eliminates the time spent parking and retrieving an automobile. It offers convenience and comfort for local travel that even the automobile cannot provide.

Development and Transit

Light rail does not by itself promise redevelopment and prosperity – but it does provide access and access is a valuable commodity. That value translates into more density, less parking and new mixes of commercial and residential development. With access that is clean, quiet and less auto dependent, the character of the surrounding development can be more pedestrian oriented. The prosperity of the Central City and Pearl District is the product of a regional land use and transportation policy that makes reinvestment attractive. There is a synergy between urban renewal investments, streetcar construction and new development and redevelopment. Parking revenue and self-imposed local improvement taxes helped to support the streetcar program. Studies for the Portland Development Commission show that Portland’s livability has attracted a creative generation of workers. New talent and an environment that supports emerging business and industry contributes to the local and international economy, provides cultural benefits to the community and brings national and international visibility. These advantages allow Portland compete with regions like San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, Minneapolis, Los Angeles and New York. Regardless of profession or life-style preferences, everyone benefits from a well-developed and integrated transit system.

Redevelopment near light rail stations, however, as Mr. O’Toole suggests, is not automatic – even with rezoning. It is not the intent of light rail to disrupt established communities and only the market can dictate when property should redevelop. The City of Portland has used tax incentives to help overcome redevelopment hurdles, but recently recognized that the transit-oriented development incentive has served its purpose and recently eliminated that incentive. While these incentives have an up front public cost, they bring development that would not have otherwise occurred or would have occurred in places where the provision of public infrastructure would be more costly. No one pretends that residents of transit-oriented development don’t drive, but they may drive less and they may own one rather than two cars. These developments generally require less parking – say 1.2 versus 2.0 spaces per unit. Light rail and streetcar investment has been matched with more than \$8 billion in adjacent new development. This new development over the long run is a great benefit to the city – in taxes, wages and the contributions of these residents.

Long-term Benefits

The resulting compact region has saved billions of dollars in infrastructure costs, including costly urban freeways, irreversible disruptions of neighborhoods and increased air pollution. The “Westside” extension of light rail, opened in 1998, provides the capacity equivalent of another freeway lane and a half on the westbound Sunset Highway.

Light rail is part of a balanced transportation system that also includes roads, freeways, bike routes, sidewalks, and other modes of transit. Mr. O’Toole’s concern of travel speeds is less relevant when one considers how long it takes to travel around a community. Portland area commutes are subject to congestion, but are shorter – 20% shorter relative to the 33 most populous cities - due to our growth management strategies and investment in transit. While average daily per capita vehicle miles of travel continues to increase across the country, it peaked in Portland in 1996. A white paper entitled “Portland’s Green Dividend” prepared for CEOs for Cities by Joe Cortright in July 2007 translates this savings in fuel alone at \$1.1 billion annually or 1.5% of all personal income in the region in the year 2005. Those savings are made available

for other needs and pleasures, which further stimulates the local economy. Some of this is spent on housing, leaving some for life's pleasures like enjoying Portland's many eateries and taverns.

The September 19, 2007 Oregonian newspaper reported on the latest Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) survey, noting that: "...the Portland area appears to be fighting the growth in misery behind the wheel better than many other regions." Without public transit the TTI survey suggests that the current levels of road congestion in the Portland region would be 21% worse. The article notes that while congestion has increased, it has increased more so across the nation in communities large and small. The article summarizes TTI's calculation of what auto dependence costs the nation, amounting to \$78.2 billion in the cost of fuel and commute time. The TTI report credits buses, MAX and streetcars with saving the region 6.7 million hours of rush hour delay. The average Portland-area commuter saves 8 hours of congestion delay annually – even if they never use the transit system. TriMet's review of the National Transit Database places Portland 11th in the nation as a result of public transit use versus a ranking of 29th in population. Joe Cortright's paper identifies 100 million hours of travel saved annually in the Portland region due to our transportation and land use planning. It values that time saving as \$1.5 billion annually for the Portland region, assuming a \$15 per hour value. Cortright cites a June 2007 study by Bob Moore, Kelly Middendorff and Jill Dehlin, "Transportation System Ratings" which notes that 60 percent of Portland residents rated their transportation system as good or excellent – compared to 35% for all Americans. Portland has achieved these positive results with comparatively modest road expenditures and with less land consumed by freeway pavement.

It is important to the citizens of the Portland region that there be a balance in transportation investments. For the many who cannot drive their own automobile, having a quality and competitive alternative is critical to the region's livability, and increasing numbers of Portlanders are choosing not to drive or own a car. The citizens of the region deserve and demand a quality of life afforded by a balanced transportation plan that supports a well-considered strategy for how this region should grow. Visitors from the world over continue to tell us their regions want the same things and they will continue to look to Portland as a model.