

Date: Wednesday, March 27, 2019

To: I-5 Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion Project
Oregon Department of Transportation

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Subject: A Year of Bad Headlines for Freeway Expansion: Public Comment on ODOT's Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion Project

(A slightly modified version of this letter was originally published as an Op-Ed in BikePortland.org on February 18, 2019.¹ We are eager to submit this for the public record on the ODOT Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion project).

In 2017, the nascent No More Freeways coalition published an editorial in *The Oregonian* asking elected officials for an honest reassessment of the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT)'s plans to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to expand the Rose Quarter Freeway in North Portland.²

Since then, headlines over the last eighteen months have only confirmed that this is a gravely misguided project.

Last March, the *Portland Mercury* reported ODOT's own consultants concluded the Rose Quarter freeway expansion wouldn't have any discernible impact on congestion.³ This finding may be counterintuitive, but it is a textbook example of the concept of "induced demand," a phrase transportation planners use to describe the phenomenon in which more lanes of freeways only lead to more eager motorists electing to drive. The Mercury also reported that, despite requests from advocates and

¹ This op-ed is available online at

<https://bikeportland.org/2019/02/18/guest-opinion-a-year-of-bad-headlines-for-freeway-expansion-295697>.

² "Portland leaders have a choice: increased congestion or courageous leadership (Guest opinion)" *The Oregonian*: https://www.oregonlive.com/opinion/2017/09/portland_leaders_have_a_choice.htm

³ "A New Report Shows Highway Widening Won't Solve Portland's Congestion Woes" *Portland Mercury*: <https://www.portlandmercury.com/news/2018/03/07/19724128/a-new-report-shows-highway-widening-wont-solve-portlands-congestion-woes>

elected officials, ODOT has refused to study whether decongestion pricing initiatives could solve the corridor's gridlock by itself, without wasting hundreds of millions on a widening project that does nothing to reduce congestion.

Secondly – as a result of induced demand, our community will suffer from worse air quality and pollution. In May, *Willamette Week* detailed the alarmingly poor air quality at Harriet Tubman Middle School.⁴ Researchers suggested students should avoid outdoor recess, and yet ODOT plans to literally expand I-5 into the backyard of the newly-reopened school. The latest studies on air pollution are grim – poor air quality is linked to lung disease, poor student performance,⁵ heart disease, dementia⁶ and diabetes.⁷ ODOT speaks to the importance of healing the Albina neighborhood's scars from urban renewal, but it is impossible to heal these scars by further polluting air near children's classrooms. Speaking of public health, ODOT has tried to sell the freeway widening as a safety project. But last October, *Willamette Week* punctured these phony claims, concluding that the stretch of freeway in question hasn't seen a traffic fatality in over a decade.⁸ Meanwhile, ODOT's regional arterials remain shockingly dangerous and deadly.

Finally, squandering half a billion dollars widening a mile of freeway is an egregious form of reckless climate denialism. We've all felt the unease that permeates our communities when our neighborhoods are cloaked with the wildfire smoke that has draped itself through the Willamette Valley three of the past four summers. October's IPCC report warned that phasing out fossil fuels in eleven years was essential to

⁴ "A Middle School Prized by Portland's Black Community Would See Its Poor Air Quality Worsen With a Rose Quarter Highway Expansion" *Willamette Week*:
<https://www.wweek.com/news/2018/07/04/a-middle-school-prized-by-portlands-black-community-would-see-its-poor-air-quality-worsen-with-a-rose-quarter-highway-expansion/>

⁵ "How Car Pollution Hurts Kids' Performance in School" *CityLab*:
<https://www.citylab.com/environment/2019/02/air-pollution-kids-health-data-school-academic-test-scores/581929/>

⁶ "Researchers warn a common air pollutant is a driver of dementia, even at levels below current EPA standards" *Washington Post*
https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2018/09/05/researchers-warn-that-common-air-pollutant-is-driver-dementia-even-levels-below-current-epa-standards/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.341e73c33e2e

⁷ "A Frightening New Reason to Worry About Air Pollution" *The Atlantic*:
<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/07/a-frightening-new-reason-to-worry-about-air-pollution/564428/>

⁸ "State Officials Say I-5 in the Rose Quarter Poses a Deadly Danger. Police Reports Undercut That Claim." *Willamette Week*:
<https://www.wweek.com/news/city/2017/10/11/state-officials-say-i-5-in-the-rose-quarter-poses-a-deadly-danger-police-reports-undercut-that-claim/>

avoiding the destruction of society as we know it. Last month's reporting by *The Oregonian* suggests that even with passage of pending carbon legislation, Oregon won't hit carbon reduction targets without fundamentally reducing emissions from private automobiles.⁹ It is frustrating to watch self-proclaimed environmentalists in City Hall and Salem champion freeway expansion when 40% of Oregon's carbon emissions come from transportation. The hurricanes, fires and floods are only growing stronger. Expansion of this freeway represents a complicit willingness to ignore Oregon's responsibility to future generations and the planet.

Future headlines will only make it more self-evident that spending billions on freeway expansions across the region is a wholly inappropriate use of taxpayer dollars given the daunting challenges Oregon faces. We encourage Oregonians committed to cost-effective governance, our children's lungs and the planet our children will inherit to join us in asking ODOT to conduct a more thorough Environmental Impact Statement that more rigorously studies the significant impacts this project will have on our community.

⁹ "With emissions on the rise, Oregon falls well short of greenhouse gas reduction goals" *The Oregonian*. https://www.oregonlive.com/politics/2018/12/with_emissions_on_the_rise_ore.html