



March 31th, 2019

To: ODOT

CC: Cooper Brown, OTC Chief of Staff
Senator Lew Frederick
Representative Tawna Sanchez
Multnomah County Chair Kafoury
Multnomah County Commissioner Jayapal
Metro Council President Lynn Peterson

Portland Mayor Wheeler
Portland Commissioner Eudaly
Portland Commissioner Fish
Portland Commissioner Fritz
Portland Commissioner Hardesty
Metro Councilor Sam Chase

Re: I-5 Rose Quarter Expansion

We ask that you eliminate all funding, cease all planning work, and completely abandon the I-5 Rose Quarter Project. We additionally ask that this project be removed from all Portland and Metro Transportation System Plans. This project would be a major step in the wrong direction for our city, the climate, and our neighborhood. Other organizations are asking for a full Environmental Impact Statement from this project, but we know what the real impact of this project will be already. Further study will not substantially change the project's impacts on our city and neighborhood. Delaying the project only to kill it later is a waste of time and taxpayer resources that should be instead planning a better, greener future for our regional transportation system.

Portland has a legacy of turning down ill-advised freeway projects. We removed the Harbor Drive Freeway in 1974 and canceled the Mt. Hood Freeway in 1976. Let's add to that "ended I-5 expansion in 2019."

Environmental Justice

The construction of I-5 through the Albina district, including Eliot, is symptomatic of systemic racism in public policy that destroyed Portland's Black neighborhoods. Eliot has struggled for years and now has something to be very proud of, Harriet Tubman Middle School. However, students at Tubman have to breathe toxic exhaust from cars and diesel trucks driving through Portland. If we care about mitigating the effects of pollution for this vulnerable population, we must discuss how to make our car and truck fleet pollute much less. We must also consider the long term goal of reducing the impacts of, and ultimately the removal of I-5 and other freeways. Our neighbors in Vancouver, BC refused to construct urban freeways in the first place and they have thrived without them. No freeway expansion has ever reduced congestion. Adding capacity to I-5 is all but guaranteed to result in increased cars and truck trips, leading to worse air quality, especially for our neighborhood and the students of Tubman.

Climate Change

According to the latest data from the International Panel on Climate Change, we have 11 years to cut carbon emissions by half in order to avoid catastrophic climate change. This necessitates a dramatic shift in how our society does everything, including moving people and goods. If we are going to have any meaningful chance of addressing climate change, we need to make dramatic moves to shift trips away from cars to more sustainable modes like public transit, biking, and walking. An investment in widening our freeways is an investment in another nail in our collective coffin. If we care about human society persisting beyond the 22nd century, we must start getting cars off the roads ASAP.



Lack of Transportation Throughput Benefits

The Rose Quarter widening project was initially conceived by highway planners to remove a bottleneck in the freeway system. This bottleneck is conveniently located in between several other bottlenecks. When traffic is at its worst in the evening peak hours, there are long lines of cars on I-5 north, on I-405 west, on I-84 east and occasionally on I-5 south of the project area. Essentially, all traffic getting stuck at the Rose Quarter is on its way to another bottleneck. These cars will not benefit substantially by being rushed through the Rose Quarter faster only to find themselves in the next bottleneck. If traffic were to improve in the area substantially, latent and induced demand would immediately increase traffic volumes through the area. There might be a few minutes or hours per day where cars and trucks were able to see travel time benefits, however we do not believe this will become not the dominant condition on the highway.

During the 2010-12 process, we were told that the highway engineers were struggling with their computer models to show that the project had any benefits at all. Recently, we have found out that the models projecting benefits from the project are due to inclusion of all projects in the Regional Transportation Plan being built. Institutional memory shows that we have never accomplished that in the past and it is an unwise assumption to make going forward. A true “no-build” analysis would show that this project on its own will not provide substantial benefits.

Safety

ODOT has pitched this project to neighborhoods as a way to move more vehicles more quickly through the Rose Quarter, both on I-5 and on surface streets. Higher speeds and increased throughput on surface roads increase the chances a driver will kill or maim another road user. Our transportation network should prioritize safety instead of speed.

The removal of Flint bridge appears to place cyclists onto either a very steep road or in mixed traffic with motor vehicles. We are aware the current renderings are not finalized, but it appears bikes are an afterthought and will be squeezed in where it is possible at the last minute, likely leading to unsafe outcomes.

Many dangerous intersections in this area have had multiple bicycle and pedestrian crashes and deaths in the past. These include Broadway/I-5/Williams and Broadway/Flint intersections. The lives that have been lost are a testament to the bad engineering decisions made in the past, and the incremental improvements made throughout the years reflect learnings on how to make the streets safer. Redesigning all of the streets in the area may place us back in a situation where we have to live with untested designs at the risk of more accidents, injuries and fatalities.

ODOT’s own data indicate that the area in question does not experience dangerous accidents at a higher than average rate. If safety is our priority, we the public would get the best bang for our buck by investing in major safety overhauls on surface streets which double as state highways in East Portland.

Fiscal Responsibility

Half a billion dollars is a substantial amount of money. America collectively and the Portland region have invested a ton of money in project after project to increase the freeway network. Locally, Portland has avoided most of these projects due to smart-minded citizens and politicians knowing that moving more traffic through an area (even if slightly faster) does not help build a stronger place. The I-5 Rose Quarter project does not offer a good return on investment. Existing infrastructure is in need of maintenance, and



capital expenditure on additional infrastructure is irresponsible. This is not a correct prioritization of public funds given the State's policy goals. While improving interstate commerce is a valid goal, we are already developing a congestion pricing scheme that will be a revenue generator, rather than a net cost.

Urban Design Problems / Lack of Local Improvements

At its core, the I-5 Rose Quarter project has always been a highway widening project. All of the "local improvements" are afterthoughts that may even make the local streets worse for many road users. The pedestrian and bike infrastructure in the area has been improving incrementally over the past two decades, and while there is room for improvement, this project does not directly address existing hazards. The designs ODOT and PBOT have presented give us little faith that after this project is completed the pedestrian, transit, and bicycle setup will even be as comfortable and efficient as the current status quo.

The triangular remnants of land provided by the lids proposed appear to be the result of engineering expediency and not the result of any intentional design aimed at creating usable public space. The renderings presented by ODOT and PBOT depict glorified traffic islands isolated by high traffic rights-of-way. We would recommend visiting the triangular diverter where MLK and Grand merge at NE Hancock to see just how we can expect these spaces to be utilized.

ODOT staff have stated that they are looking for ideas for what to put on the lids - we have given you ideas. Specifically we need to see buildings and usable public open spaces on top of the freeway if we are to stitch this neighborhood back together over the freeway. Seattle's Freeway Park (Designed by Lawrence Halprin of Keller Fountain fame) and the adjacent Washington State Convention Center show that this is possible. Spaces that are not accessible and have no active programming are not going to be used and seem destined to be abandoned and ignored by all but those with no other place to sleep (again, consider the MLK/Grand/Hancock triangle).

If we are going to make a multi-generational investment in the Rose Quarter Area, we need to do it right. This process is coming at the urban design problem from a vehicle throughput lens which will further deteriorate the street activity in the area.

Misalignment with Portland's Goals

Portland has adopted Vision Zero, a Climate Action Plan and mode-split goals. The I-5 Rose Quarter project is anathema to all of these. The project is a 20th century transportation solution in a world of 21st century problems. The net outcome will inevitably be higher regional vehicle miles traveled (VMT), which is highly correlated with traffic fatalities. More VMT also will inevitably lead to higher CO2 emissions, which undermines our climate change goals. Making it faster and easier to drive has historically always led to more driving. This violates our mode-split goals. The direct fiscal costs of the project, while high, pale before those of the externalities and the opportunity costs of this investment.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jere Fitterman
Board Chair, Eliot Neighborhood Association

Brad Baker
Land Use Chair, Eliot Neighborhood Association