

Date: Monday, April 1, 2019

To: Oregon Department of Transportation

From: Parents of Harriet Tubman Middle School Students

Subject: Tubman Community Members Voice Opposition to Oregon Department of Transportation's Proposed Rose Quarter Freeway Widening Project, Call for Environmental Impact Statement

The undersigned parents of Harriet Tubman Middle School students wish to formally voice our opposition to the Oregon Department of Transportation's (ODOT)'s plans to widen the Rose Quarter Freeway into the backyard of the Harriet Tubman campus. Many Tubman community members believe this freeway widening proposal is a direct affront to the immediate health and safety of our students, a potentially destabilizing blow to the decades-long community effort to restore a thriving and diverse Middle School community at the historic Tubman campus, and an unacceptable investment in fossil-fuel infrastructure that imperils future generations to the potentially catastrophic horrors of climate change. Alternatives should be more rigorously explored that don't involve threatening the health, well-being, and safety of our students, teachers, and community, and ODOT should heed the calls of PPS Board Members and numerous other elected officials to conduct a full Environmental Impact Statement before moving forward with this proposed freeway expansion.

History and present of Harriet Tubman Middle School

The history of disinvestment and subsequent gentrification and displacement of our inner North Portland neighborhood is well documented but necessary context to frame the ongoing challenges the Tubman community is facing today.¹ The Harriet Tubman Campus (then known as Eliot Elementary) was built in 1953 before the I-5 project was constructed. Despite opposition from PPS and the local community, the construction of I-5 in the 1970s bulldozed 330 homes in Portland's historically black Albina neighborhood. Construction of this freeway, coupled with the construction of Memorial Coliseum and the Legacy Emanuel hospital, had a significant destabilizing impact on the local black community, bulldozing many homes and businesses and pushing the African American community farther North and Northeast. PPS nearly

¹ Karen Gibson, "Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000."

closed Tubman in 1982, but a march of over 500 community members organized by the Black United Front demanded PPS listen to the existing African-American community who wanted to retain Tubman as a middle school and keep Boise Elementary open as a nearby neighborhood school.² Low enrollment led to the building being shuttered in 2012, despite community protests. Portland Public Schools (PPS)' efforts to address redistricting school boundaries and provide adequate middle-level education to students in our neighborhood led to the decision to reopen Harriet Tubman as a Middle School in 2018.

Harriet Tubman students and teachers have an uncompromised right to clean air. Freeway expansion inevitably leads to air pollution that directly threatens our community.

Air quality researchers at Portland State University released a report in April 2018 expressing their concerns about the high levels of air pollution at Harriet Tubman Middle School. The first recommendation of the report stated that “student outdoor activities be limited at Harriet Tubman Middle School, especially during high traffic periods.”³ The report found levels of acrolein, benzene, and naphthalene higher than Oregon’s Ambient Benchmark Concentrations. Nearly 18,000 diesel-powered trucks pass by Tubman on a daily basis - as of March 2019, Oregon has by far the weakest diesel regulations on the West Coast. The report was clear: “the primary risks to future occupants of Tubman MS related to ambient air quality are due to freeway emissions.”

Willamette Week reported on this finding, and quoted PSU’s Dr. Linda George saying that “It’s very reasonable to expect concentrations would be higher and extend further into the property” if the freeway was widened into the backyard of the campus.⁴

This report is bolstered by other findings. Late last year, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) published their most recent iteration of the National Air Toxics Assessment, which reflected conditions in 2014. EPA ranked census tract 23.03 (the tract at Tubman) as the seventh highest of risk for cancer of any in Oregon (census

² More on the history of the 1982 protests can be found here: “The Harriet Tubman Middle Schools Protests: Black United Front vs The Portland School Board” <http://publichistorypdx.org/2017/03/26/harriet-tubman-middle-school-protests-black-united-front-vs-portland-school-board/>

³ “Indoor and outdoor air quality at Harriet Tubman Middle School and the design of mitigation measures: Phase I report” was published on April 18, 2018; the document is available here: https://s3.amazonaws.com/arc-wordpress-client-uploads/wwweek/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/05143206/Tubman-PSU_HTMSReport_Phase1-Outdoor-Monitoring_Final.pdf

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*, July 4, 2018: <https://www.wwweek.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/>

tracts 22.03 and 21 are similarly high). All three rank among the top ten in the state, and this is almost certainly an underestimate - the EPA doesn't recognize diesel particulate as a carcinogen, so it's not fully included in the estimate.

Given these statistics about the dirty air pollution in our neighborhood, we find it insulting that ODOT's freeway expansion proposal involves widening I-5 (and the tens of thousands of emitting automobiles and trucks) farther east and even closer to the Tubman building and students inside it. As parents of children who breathe the polluted air, we are the ones forced to live with the repercussions of these decisions. It's our material and physical loss when we are forced to buy inhalers for our children when they are diagnosed with asthma, and it's our children who suffer these very real health consequences. It's our teachers and administrators who are always wondering if a headache is just an occasional migraine or a symptom of something more nefarious, due to the particulates in the air from the nearby freeway. It's our right and responsibility to fiercely demand a rational, empirical, and thorough to ensuring this Middle School is a safe and healthy learning environment and workplace.

The overwhelming academic literature on air pollution from transportation suggests that decongestion pricing, and not freeway expansion, is the best policy to improve local air pollutants and mitigate the impacts of freeways on their surrounding communities.⁵ According to *The Washington Post*, childhood asthma rates in Stockholm, Sweden were reduced by nearly fifty percent after the implementation of decongestion pricing.⁶

For some reason, ODOT's Environmental Assessment of the impacts of this project does not study the impact that decongestion pricing would have on the traffic on the I-5 corridor nor its impact on the necessity of this project. Our community is

⁵ University of British Columbia Professor Dr. Alex Bigazzi, in an interview regarding his article "Can traffic management strategies improve urban air quality? A review of the evidence" published in the *Journal of Transport and Health*:

"We looked at the entire body of literature, including hundreds of published papers, and identified 65 studies documenting the real-world effects of 22 types of traffic management strategies including speed enforcement programs, lane management such as HOV lanes, road and congestion pricing, and trip reduction strategies like incentives for telecommuting or ride sharing. The strategies with the best evidence of air quality improvements are area road/congestion pricing and low-emission zones. Other strategies have potential benefits, but there is less empirical evidence, either because the benefits are very small or because the benefits are offset by some other effect."

Dr. Bigazzi's article can be read here: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2214140517301330>

Dr. Bigazzi's quote is from this interview on the University of British Columbia's website: <https://news.ubc.ca/2017/10/05/road-pricing-most-effective-in-reducing-vehicle-emissions/>

⁶ "Congestion pricing also clears the lungs, researchers say" *Washington Post*. March 27, 2018. https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/tripping/wp/2018/03/27/congestion-pricing-clears-the-lungs-too-researchers-say/?utm_term=.fe445a2efa58

outraged that ODOT is not pursuing the easiest, most cost-effective policy to address traffic congestion that the scientific consensus also recognizes is the most likely to improve air quality in our community. ODOT's projections of improved air quality in the area under the "build" scenario are also based on assumptions about improvements in technology and local air quality regulations - assumptions the agency is unable to promise will happen.

Tubman parents take the existential threat of climate change seriously - does ODOT?

As parents of Harriet Tubman students, it's our responsibility to work to help every student at Tubman succeed, both here at this institution and into the future as the next generation of Portlanders, Oregonians, and Americans. Given this perspective, as community members we feel it is important to note that this proposed freeway expansion flies directly in the face of local, state-level, and international findings about the grim necessity of decarbonization. The notion that a sixth grader entering Harriet Tubman Middle School next autumn would be wrapping up their senior year of college in 2030, the year that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recently stated was the deadline for a complete decarbonization to avoid the absolute worst impacts of climate change, is grounds for significant concern. Freeway expansion is climate denialism - American cities simply cannot decarbonize through electrification of existing vehicles alone.⁷ Fossil fuel infrastructure like freeway expansion has no place in our current transportation system if we are to fully meet our goals. Investments in public transportation and dense, walkable urban communities help build low-carbon communities that will help future generations avoid the worst of climate change's excesses. Meanwhile, the Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion project actually *slows* bus speeds through the neighborhood.

Harriet Tubman is a frontline community

⁷ "There is a persistent belief, among both state officials and the public, that clean cars and clean fuels alone can achieve California's climate goals, but this is fundamentally untrue," [Matthew Baker, policy director for California's the Planning and Conservation League] says. "Even if we have 100 percent zero-emission vehicles and 75 percent renewable energy production by 2050—both ambitious goals—we still need a 15 percent reduction of VMT beyond what current regional plans project to achieve."

Plus EVs are not a public health panacea. "EVs don't relieve congestion, and the dust from brakes and tires are a major source of particulate matter air pollution, which causes respiratory illness," says Bryn Lindblad, associate director of Climate Resolve. "That last fact doesn't really seem to be on people's radar as they look to EVs to be the solution."

"When electric isn't good enough: Sacramento is the staging ground for a fight to make drivers spend less time on the road" *Curbed*. <https://www.curbed.com/a/texas-california/electric-cars-climate-change-sacramento-california>

According to PPS' data, just under half of Harriet Tubman's students qualify for free and reduced price meals. Only 31.4% of Harriet Tubman students identify as white - this is the 2nd lowest percentage of a middle school campus out of the thirteen in the district. 40% of Harriet Tubman's students identify as black - the third highest of any PPS campus across all grade levels.

	% Non-White ⁸	% Black	% Underserved ⁹	% on Free /Reduced Lunch ¹⁰
Harriet Tubman Students	68.6	40.5	73.5	48.9%
All PPS Middle Schools	44.3	9.5	47.5	33.3%
All PPS students	43.7	8.9	49	36.0%

- *2018-2019 PPS Demographics*

After years of organizing on PPS' expedited timeline to open the school, Tubman parents from four demographically different elementary schools across inner North/Northeast Portland have spent the past two years collaboratively attempting to match PPS' ambitious timeline for opening by building the network of parents, teachers and students who can provide the best support for our children's education.

As parents who want this school to succeed, we are tasked with solving problems big and small - we are spending enormous amounts of our own volunteer time and resources finding answers to questions as big as "what middle-level programming will best meet the needs of a student body with wildly different needs" and as small as "how do we find enough parent volunteers to chaperone our school's first Middle School dance." We are acutely aware of the reality that building these relationships across our

⁸ Data on the % Non-White and % Black demography of PPS schools can be found here: <https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/207/Enrollment%20by%20Race%20and%20School%202018-19.pdf>

⁹ According to PPS, "the Combined Underserved category was originally established by the Oregon Department of Education as part of the requirements of the ESEA Waiver. PPS' current definition of Combined Underserved includes the following: Students eligible for Special Education, Students with Limited English Proficiency, Students eligible to receive free meals by Direct Certification, Students identifying as Black, Latino/Hispanic, Native American, and/or Pacific Islander." This data can be found here: <https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/207/Enrollment%20of%20Underserved%20Groups%20018-19.pdf>

¹⁰Data on PPS's free/reduced lunch demography is available here: https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/207/Enrollment%20by%20Meal%20Eligibility_Free%202018-19.pdf

community is especially difficult given the grave demographic and material disparities between our four feeder elementary schools. Building a social institution that can marshal the resources of the Tubman community and the city at large to stick up for and support all 491 students enrolled at the school is a difficult task, and our community continues to grapple with questions of how to serve our students equitably.

Tubman Community needs stability and support - not construction headaches, relocation, and pollution

This project does an enormous disservice to the North/Northeast Portland families who are putting in the elbow grease to build a thriving, integrated, restored community at Harriet Tubman Middle School. While our community's capacity to oppose this freeway expansion is relatively low, given the numerous other daunting challenges our community face, we remain steadfastly opposed to this project and ask ODOT to explore other alternatives less disruptive to our community. We're grateful for PPS's support in asking for an Environmental Impact Statement.

This freeway expansion (and the disruptive impact of years of construction leading up to it) directly threatens the work our neighborhoods have put into turning this empty school campus into a thriving, integrated community. How will these hard-won gains respond to a potential disruptive school-relocation during ODOT's construction? Will legitimate concerns about increased air pollution force neighborhood parents to reconsider sending their student to Tubman, or to more strongly consider charter/alternative/private schools? How will this school retain teachers when there's already considerable evidence that this community's air quality is a direct threat to the health and well-being of anyone who lives or works here? Has ODOT meaningfully engaged with PPS to ensure their proposal doesn't disrupt the already destabilized hillside on which Tubman rests? What assurances does the Tubman community have that ODOT won't "value-engineer" out the crucial sound walls or other remediation features of their plan when the costs of the project inevitably overrun? ODOT currently plans on routing significant bus/automobile traffic on N Flint during the proposed reconstruction of the N Williams/Vancouver bridges - two Tubman students have already been hit on N Flint while walking to school, and bringing this additional traffic to the western front of the school will make for chaotic pick-up/drop-off routines.

We find it unjust to ask current and future Tubman students to pay decades of bonding debt to pay for this project, as well as pay for the enormous costs of the additional carbon in the atmosphere and air pollutants in the neighborhood. As parents, citizens, community members, students, and Portlanders, we state our firm opposition

to ODOT's Rose Quarter freeway widening proposal, and demand that if this project does move forward, the agency conduct an Environmental Impact Statement to address the significant impacts this project would cause to the health and safety of our students and community.

Signed,

Brooke Herout, Harriet Tubman Middle School PTSA Vice President

Joan Petit, Harriet Tubman Parent

Lee Ann Moyer, Harriet Tubman Parent

Rayna Geer, Harriet Tubman Parent

Taylor Geer, Harriet Tubman Parent

Jim Herout, Harriet Tubman Parent