

No More Freeway Expansions Coalition



February 26, 2018

Representative Susan McClain, Chair
House Committee on Transportation Policy
State Capitol,
Salem, OR 97310

RE: Testimony on Mega Projects

Dear Chair McClain and Committee Members:

I'm appearing today as a member of the group No More Freeway Expansions. We're a group of Portland area citizens who are concerned about the cost, environmental, safety and transportation impacts of the Rose Quarter Freeway widening project and the other proposed freeway projects in the Portland Metropolitan area.

In just the past few months, over 800 persons and 30 organizations have joined with our organization or signed our letters addressed to Portland City Council and state and regional leaders questioning in the direction of the proposed Rose Quarter Freeway widening project. These participants and signatories represent a broad range of public health, social justice, climate, conservation, small business and neighborhood organizations. (You can learn more about our organization at <https://nomorefreewayspx.com>.)

It is well that the Legislature decided in passing HB 2017 to insist on close oversight over megaprojects. If this committee and the Legislature undertake their oversight responsibilities seriously, we believe that you will find that this project is deeply flawed, and that it should be re-thought.

A \$450 million freeway widening is out of step with our environmental and safety objectives.

In light of the state's environmental objectives—its stated goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions—and its prioritization of traffic safety, this project represents a considerable waste of resources. Evidence of climate change is all around us. Despite its bold goal, the state's Greenhouse Gas Commission tells us we're losing ground in reducing greenhouse gases, chiefly because we're driving more. Building more freeways encourages more driving, and higher greenhouse gas emissions.

Despite claims that there are many fender benders on this stretch of I-5, the data and official reports make it clear that this is one of the safest ODOT facilities in the Portland metropolitan area. Far more people die and are seriously injured on ODOT's multi-lane arterials, such as Powell Boulevard, 82nd Avenue, Sandy Boulevard and others. On average, I-5 is eight times safer than these multi-lane arterials per mile traveled, according to Metro's state of safety report.

If we're at all serious about addressing climate change and achieving fewer traffic deaths (much less vision zero) we shouldn't squander half a billion dollars on a project that does little or nothing to advance either of these goals.

Widening I-5 at Rose Quarter won't reduce traffic congestion

Most critically, widening this freeway will do virtually nothing to reduce traffic congestion in the Portland area. Funding for this project is based on a false premise: that adding one lane to the freeway between the Burnside and Fremont bridges will somehow reduce congestion on I-5.

It won't. That's not my judgment, it's actually the judgment of transportation professionals: Highway widening in dense urban environments stimulates more traffic that produces more congestion, and with it more pollution. ODOT and city of Portland staffs have conceded that this freeway widening will not reduce the regular, daily "recurring" congestion which is what most people complain about.

Obviously, Portlanders and people from around the state are frustrated by congestion. But widening this freeway in this location will do virtually nothing to reduce the daily, recurring congestion. You can spend half a billion dollars here and will still be congested, day in, day out when you are done.

Project implementation should be postponed until after value pricing is implemented

The 2017 Legislature wisely directed the Oregon Department of Transportation to implement value pricing on I-5 and I-205, and possibly other freeways. As an economist, I am confident in telling you that road pricing is the only policy that has been shown to actually reduce congestion. Building more un-priced road capacity in urban areas is subject to what economists call "The Fundamental Law of Road Congestion." Additional capacity simply generates more traffic, with the result that after spending hundreds of millions, traffic is as bad as ever.

Implemented correctly, value pricing can eliminate congestion without the need to spend hundreds of millions on additional capacity.

Building first and pricing later would be a costly mistake. Consider Louisville, Kentucky, which just spend over \$1 billion widening I-65 between its Indiana suburbs and downtown Louisville. This road is very similar to I-5; historically it has carried about

120,000 vehicles per day across the Ohio River (about the same as I-5's 130,000). After widening this freeway from 6 lanes to 12 lanes, the state imposed a toll of \$1-\$2 for most cars to cross the river. When they did, traffic fell from 120,000 vehicles per day to about 70,000. They doubled the size of the road, and with pricing, demand fell by almost half. They wasted the \$1 billion they spent because if users were asked to pay even a modest price, the road would never be congested.

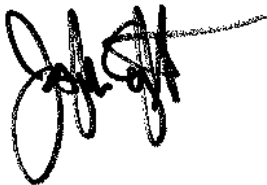
Even if you think the Rose Quarter Freeway widening is a good idea—which we don't—you should insist that value-pricing be implemented *first* so that you know whether you actually need to go ahead and spend \$450 million here. To do otherwise would be monumentally imprudent and risk wasting all the money you're spending.

The \$450 million could be far better spent on improvements that would improve safety and facilitate more widespread and equitable mobility through the region.

Oregon has a long and distinguished history of cancelling un-needed freeway projects and re-deploying the resources to make more widespread and effective improvements to the transportation system. The cancelled Mt. Hood Freeway provided the funds to state Portland's light rail system, and fund dozens of road improvement projects around the region. The state also cancelled a proposed I-505 freeway that would have divided Northwest Portland, and a proposed I-305 freeway that would have cut through Salem neighborhoods; in both cases, the money for these freeways was used to make smarter, more economical and more effective improvements to the road system.

The I-5 Rose Quarter Freeway widening project is at odds with Oregon's stated environmental and safety objectives, it won't reduce daily recurring congestion on I-5; we should insist that ODOT implement legislatively directed value pricing before wasting any money on construction that's likely to be un-needed, and the Legislature should look carefully to see if there aren't much better alternatives for investing \$450 million that would meet our transportation, safety and environmental objectives.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "John S. ...", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Member,
No More Freeway Expansions Coalition
www.nomorefreewayspdx.com