
TO: Joint Committee on Transportation
FROM: Taylor Steenblock, Multnomah County Government Relations
RE: HB 3065, -5
DATE: March 16, 2021

Co-Chairs Beyer and McLain, Co-Vice Chairs Boquist and Noble, and members of the committee:

Thank you for your efforts in working towards a more equitable advancement of congestion management in the Portland metropolitan area. HB 2017 and subsequent work has gone a long way in modernizing our transportation system and responding to the community's needs with regard to our roads, bridges, highways and other thoroughfares. We have also appreciated the invitation to be a part of a tolling workgroup established by ODOT earlier in the 2021 session. This workgroup was brought together initially to work on tolling provisions in HB 3055. While we see some improvement in parts of the language first seen in HB 3055 and now in HB 3065, we have some remaining concerns that we would like to see addressed. These concerns are detailed below.

The proposed legislation does acknowledge congestion is a problem in the region (and state) in section 4a by noting that tolling can be used to reduce traffic congestion and support the state's greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals. While the bill still prioritizes spending toll revenue on multiple highway projects, it does note that any remaining monies may fund other programs on highways included in ORS 366.005, which is a broad definition and addresses many of the needs that the region has prioritized. We are grateful for this improvement.

Our main concern persists around how the money generated from tolling will be spent in our region. The bill does not specifically address congestion off system or in areas where diversion is created on local roads. Simply being eligible for funding under ORS 366.005 does not go far enough. The language in the bill needs to be flexible enough that as congestion and subsequent diversion arise over time, ODOT and the region can respond with the right projects to mitigate impacts. Intentional inclusion of off system impacts related to tolling is necessary to address our concern and to mitigate ongoing, new, or increasing diversion as well as the projects we would potentially need to fund should diversion create congestion off the ODOT system. The current language implies that the on system highway projects will be funded and constructed first, with other projects such as diversion to follow. While we are supportive of more transportation funds being generated and spent in our region, we are concerned that there will not be sufficient funds remaining to address off-system impacts if these diversion projects are not integrated and funded alongside major highway projects.

As the gas tax becomes a less sustainable funding source for necessary infrastructure, the region and the state are going to have to look for ways to fund improvements. Tolling and congestion pricing are important parts of that but they will not properly serve the region if funds can only effectively be used on state highways, while at the same time prompting additional needs for non-highway facilities. We are hopeful that this change can be made and look forward to continuing to work with regional and statewide partners as we make this bill a reflection of community values around equity and transportation modernization.

Sincerely,

Taylor Steenblock
Multnomah County Government Relations