



**Date:** March 16, 2021

**To:** Oregon Legislature, Joint Committee on Transportation

**From:** Aaron Brown, No More Freeways

**Memo Subject:** Three and a Half Years of the Rose Quarter Freeway Fight, summarized

The following is a summary of No More Freeways ongoing campaign against ODOT's proposed \$800 million Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion in the backyard of Harriet Tubman Middle School. We have written this memo to provide elected officials an overview of our history with the project, which includes numerous details and critiques that we doubt ODOT has actively been sharing with you over the past few years. This memo explores our concerns with the project, where explicitly we believe ODOT is lying or deliberately misleading the public, and concludes with some opportunities for elected officials to demonstrate political leadership and at least study alternatives to this proposed freeway expansion. While our focus has remained almost exclusively on the Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion, we're fairly certain that similar critiques, slights-of-hand, and impacts to vulnerable communities follow ODOT's to all of their megaprojects, particularly the large highway projects in the Portland Metro region. While we are confident in our work and in our ongoing collaboration with community partners, any mistakes in this document are solely the responsibility of No More Freeways.

No More Freeways was officially founded in August 2017, months after passage of HB2017 which unlocked state funding for ODOT to proceed with the Rose Quarter freeway expansion.<sup>1</sup> We've been organizing with community partners since, and have assembled a coalition of climate, transportation, and public health advocates as well as neighborhood and PTA leaders to formally oppose the expansion. We've testified to Portland City Hall, Metro, the State Legislature, School Board meetings, ODOT hearings, the Oregon Transportation Commission meetings, and have built a formidable mailing list and donor base to build an apparatus to fight this freeway expansion.

---

<sup>1</sup>No More Freeways co-founder Chris Smith can claim to be the first appointed official to vote against this project back in 2012 as a member of the Planning and Sustainability Commission, when the city and ODOT first proposed this project. This *Portland Mercury* article from 2012 shows how much has (and hasn't) changed in the last nine years: <https://www.portlandmercury.com/BlogtownPDX/archives/2012/06/11/were-planning-to-spend-400-million-to-widen-a-freeway-through-the-rose-quarter>



ODOT has adamantly claimed that an Environmental Assessment (EA), and not a full blown Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), would be sufficient preparation and study before moving forward with the project. Their decision to do so was likely spurred by the desire to expedite their construction timeline, save costs and avoid community critique. The EA's focus was remarkably narrow in scope.

ODOT issued their EA in mid-January 2019; the public was given just 45 days to submit testimony on the proposal (ODOT ignored NMF's repeated requests for a 90 day comment period).<sup>2</sup> The EA concealed numerous basic facts about the project from the public. It omitted any salient quantitative traffic information, it failed to reveal plans to add a traffic lane on NE Broadway, and hid plans to build a substantial structure over the Esplanade which would have required (costly, difficult to coordinate) construction in the Willamette River and sign-off from the city, which they nearly tricked the city's Parks department in signing off on before we daylighted it in the media.<sup>3</sup> Local architect Iain Mackenzie asked for the underlying plans upon which the computer images were built and was officially told by ODOT staff that "no plans exist." Only later, with just five days left in the comment period, and under threat of legal action, did the agency finally release 30 gigabytes of plan files--which revealed for the first time the intrusion of the freeway into the Willamette River, onto the cherished Eastbank Esplanade and the widening of Broadway.<sup>4</sup> Finally, ODOT was slow to release the traffic projection data on which they based their (dubious) claims about the supposed climate, congestion and air pollution benefits of the expansion; when it was finally released after public demands, our traffic engineers found numerous clear, demonstrable inaccuracies in the data deliberately included for ODOT to put their thumbs on the scale to justify this proposal and minimize statistics about the very real traffic, air pollution, and carbon impacts of this project.<sup>5</sup> Our research on what little traffic data ODOT ultimately released during the

---

<sup>2</sup> Our letter asking for a 90 day public comment period is available here:

[https://gallery.mailchimp.com/33eee76771d2f4f3df7221428/files/7a9d2360-272d-4ddb-b311-c4b1081d784b/112818\\_60\\_Day\\_Extension\\_Request\\_Letter.pdf](https://gallery.mailchimp.com/33eee76771d2f4f3df7221428/files/7a9d2360-272d-4ddb-b311-c4b1081d784b/112818_60_Day_Extension_Request_Letter.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Our letter detailing all of the traffic projections that ODOT omitted in the 2019 Environmental Assessment is here:

<https://nomorefreewayspx.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/030419-nmf-request-for-additional-ea-data.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> *BikePortland.org* covered the news about this finding here:

<https://bikeportland.org/2019/03/29/odots-i-5-freeway-widening-project-would-cast-even-larger-shadow-over-eastbank-esplanade-297725>

<sup>5</sup> We won't bore you in this memo with wonky, technical details about the numerous, deliberate slights-of-hand that were baked into the traffic projections we ultimately received, but they were substantial. No More Freeways submitted a rigorous critique of ODOT's traffic projections included in the Public Comment period in 2019. A traffic engineer who worked with us to produce our traffic memo submitted to the EA commentary told the *Portland Mercury* in December 2019 "At the end of the day, the [environmental assessment] was a half-assed effort that was quite obviously prepared to reach a pre-ordained conclusion." Our technical memo highlighting ODOT's deliberate malfeasance to justify their freeway expansion, is available here:

[https://nomorefreewayspx.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/nmf\\_technical\\_memo-1.pdf](https://nomorefreewayspx.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/nmf_technical_memo-1.pdf)

OPB covered the story about the findings in March 2019: "ODOT acknowledged Tuesday that its traffic modeling for another freeway project — a \$500 million upgrade to I-5 in Portland's Rose Quarter area — assumes that the Columbia River Crossing will still be built."



Environmental Assessment echoes other research commissioned by ODOT itself that openly challenges the EA's findings of any benefits of traffic congestion reduction from this proposed expansion.<sup>6</sup> The iron rule of induced demand continues to hold.<sup>7</sup>

ODOT originally planned to have no public meeting to receive comments. Only through the intervention then-Portland Commissioner Chloe Eudaly, was there one public hearing held on March 21, 2019; public opposition to the project overwhelmed over three hours of testimony by an 8-1 margin, and was covered as a victory for the freeway opponents by multiple media that attended.<sup>8</sup> When the public comment officially closed on April 1, 2019, No More Freeways helped organize over 2,300 comments submitted to ODOT during the official public comment period in 2019, with 89% of comments received in opposition to the project and the overwhelming majority demanding ODOT conduct a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). We also submitted dozens of pieces of academic literature detailing the validity of our claims on carbon emissions, air pollution, and induced demand. Opposition to the project frequently cited concerns about air pollution at Harriet Tubman Middle School, concerns about increased carbon emissions in the wake of the 2018 IPCC report, subpar plans for the surface-level street plans that prioritized movement of automobiles over safe bicycle and pedestrian plans, removal of the Flint Avenue bridge, increased traffic in the immediate neighborhood, skepticism about ODOT's claims on traffic safety and congestion relief, and demands for true restorative justice for the Albina Neighborhood.

Community leaders demanding a full EIS in March 2019 include Commissioner Eudaly, State Representative Karin Power, Metro, Audubon Society of Portland, Business for Better Portland, Portland Public Schools, Oregon Walks, The Street Trust, Albina Vision Trust, the Eliot Neighborhood Association, the City's Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committees, the Planning and Sustainability Commission, and many more.<sup>9</sup> Metro's letter called ODOT's claims that this project wasn't a freeway expansion "not objectively true and is potentially misleading."<sup>10</sup> Subsequent calls for an Environmental Impact Statement were made later in 2019 by other leaders including

---

<https://www.opb.org/news/article/odot-used-long-dead-i-5-bridge-replacement-to-plan-rose-quarter-upgrade/>

<sup>6</sup> 2018 story in *The Portland Mercury*: "...according to a firm hired by the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), none of the dozen highway-widening projects that are currently being planned in and around Portland by state officials would be enough in coming years to stem the increasing congestion choking Portland highways." <https://www.portlandmercury.com/news/2018/03/07/19724128/a-new-report-shows-highway-widening-wont-solve-portlands-congestion-woes>

<sup>7</sup> "The "fundamental rule" of traffic: building new roads just makes people drive more" VOX.

<https://www.vox.com/2014/10/23/6994159/traffic-roads-induced-demand>

<sup>8</sup> "Opponents Dominate Hearing On Portland Rose Quarter I-5 Expansion Project" *Oregon Public Broadcasting*: <https://www.opb.org/news/article/portland-oregon-interstate-5-rose-quarter-expansion-hearing/>

<sup>9</sup> To see the letters submitted as Public Comment from a list of prominent local organizations, please check out our website: <https://nomorefreewayspx.com/publiccomment/>

<sup>10</sup> Oregon Metro's full letter about the Environmental Assessment documents, dated April 2019: <https://nomorefreewayspx.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/ea-review-comment-letter-040119.pdf>



Speaker Tina Kotek, State Representative Rob Nosse, State Senator Michael Dembrow, and Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler.

Multiple newspapers reported in August 2019 that, after loud outcry, ODOT and the OTC signaled to elected officials and local community partners that the agency intended to move forward with an Environmental Impact Statement after the loud community opposition.<sup>11</sup> However, the Oregon Transportation Commission (OTC), likely under the direction of their then-newly appointed Chair Bob Van Brocklin, abruptly changed direction and pushed forward with a plan to have the OTC vote to approve the existing EA in December 2019. After the Governor stepped in with a sternly written letter the day before the vote, the OTC deferred until a vote ultimately held in early April, while drawing up a list of conditions they would meet in order to convince local elected officials to support the existing EA. Those stipulations included the establishment of a Community Advisory Committee (since shuttered), the Executive Steering Committee (since abandoned by Albina Vision Trust, Portland Mayor Wheeler, Portland Commissioner Eudaly, and Multnomah County Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson), the directive to study freeway caps (which ODOT did not start until a year after their request), and for the continued coordination with Portland Public Schools (which, according to our conversations with PPS staff and board members, appears to not have progressed in any meaningful fashion).<sup>12</sup> A letter penned in March by the City, County, Metro, Albina Vision Trust, and PPS demanded either an Environmental Impact Statement or rigorous, fully empowered advisory committees as this project moved forward; ODOT is currently delivering neither.<sup>13</sup>

During this delay, it was also determined that ODOT had been publicly lying about the expected costs; the expansion was sold to the Legislature in 2017 with the agency maintaining it would cost \$450 million. In December 2019, months after the public comment period had closed, ODOT produced new cost estimates that nearly doubled the price of the project to nearly \$800 million, and made these numbers available to the OTC in advance of their vote - but not to the public at large. There is every reason to believe these costs will only continue to escalate. Furthermore, these cost estimates don't include the cost of buildable covers that Albina Vision Trust has been demanding (buildable covers that, Albina Vision representatives claim, ODOT had

---

<sup>11</sup> "Critics of ODOT's I-5 Rose Quarter Project Believe The Agency Will Conduct A Full Environmental Impact Statement" *Willamette Week*:  
<https://www.wweek.com/news/2019/08/27/critics-of-odots-i-5-rose-quarter-project-believe-the-agency-will-conduct-a-full-environmental-impact-statement/>

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Maus at *bikeportland.org* has a great run down of the January 2020 OTC meeting.  
<https://bikeportland.org/2020/01/24/odot-takes-more-heat-for-rose-quarter-missteps-at-commission-meeting-310020>  
The full list of "Rose Quarter Proposed Actions" adopted by the OTC here:  
<https://bikeportland.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/OTC-January-23-2020-RQ-Proposed-Actions.pdf>

<sup>13</sup>This letter from elected officials is currently available here:  
[https://nomorefreewayspx.files.wordpress.com/2021/01/03.27.20\\_i5rq\\_otc\\_jointletter.pdf](https://nomorefreewayspx.files.wordpress.com/2021/01/03.27.20_i5rq_otc_jointletter.pdf)



originally promised) to allow better opportunity to shape the neighborhood and heal the injustices and racist trespasses of urban renewal to the Albina Neighborhood. Nevertheless, the OTC voted unanimously in April to approve the Environmental Assessment, despite an additional 700+ postcards and emails sent to the OTC that winter from community members demanding a full EIS.

Three months later, after years of working in good faith with the agency and inspired by the reemergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, Albina Vision Trust officially walked away from ODOT's Executive Steering Committee (ESC) for the project; Commissioners Eudaly, Vega Pederson and Mayor Wheeler followed suit. Even *The Oregonian* editorial board, a longtime supporter of the project, reversed course in June 2020 with an editorial slamming ODOT for their lack of accountability, noting that “[w]hile the highway project may have the legislative authority to proceed, it now lacks the moral authority to do so.”<sup>14</sup> This follows news that the agency deliberately buried the results of independent focus groups ODOT conducted with African Americans, who expressed near universal skepticism of ODOT's proposals and opposition to many central parts of the project.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, ODOT's Community Advisory Committee (CAC) was disbanded by the agency in September after just three meetings, as ODOT staff realized that their handpicked CAC members were unwilling to provide a “rubber stamp” approval.<sup>16</sup> 14 CAC members wrote a blistering letter to the OTC about their experiences with ODOT and the Rose Quarter, stating they were planning to mass-resign from the committee entirely before ODOT abruptly shut the committee down:

*“The Oregon Department of Transportation disbanded the CAC because we didn't play ball with them. We refused to be a compliant part of the non-transparent facade of community engagement that ODOT had created in the CAC. We refused to rubber-stamp a project that will lead to poor air quality outcomes for children at Harriet Tubman Middle School and the neighborhood at*

---

<sup>14</sup> “Editorial: I-5/Rose Quarter project an opportunity and obligation for state to make amends” July 12, 2020, *The Oregonian*

<https://www.oregonlive.com/opinion/2020/07/editorial-i-5rose-quarter-project-an-opportunity-and-obligation-for-state-to-make-amends.html>

<sup>15</sup> “Participants said that this project, as it stands, would not benefit the African American community, nor would it bring African Americans back to this area in its current form.” The study was conducted in September 2019, but not released to the public until June 2020. It can be read in full here:

[https://www.i5rosequarter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20200204\\_AADiscussionGroups\\_Report\\_Final.pdf](https://www.i5rosequarter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20200204_AADiscussionGroups_Report_Final.pdf)

<sup>16</sup> “Inside a Contentious, Now-Shuttered Advisory Committee on the Portland I-5 Widening Plan” *Portland Mercury*” <https://www.portlandmercury.com/blogtown/2020/09/08/28796932/inside-a-contentious-now-shuttered-advisory-committee-on-the-portland-i-5-widening-plan>



large. We refused to stop asking the hard questions, and we demanded that our voices, including and especially the voices of Black Portlanders, be heard.<sup>17</sup>

ODOT has since created a new Historic Albina Advisory Committee (HAAC) to “center Black voices.” Former students from Harriet Tubman Middle School have repeatedly testified to the HAAC about their concerns about the worsening air pollution the freeway expansion would bring to their neighborhood, a concern that’s been echoed by HAAC members. It’s virtually impossible to imagine any iteration of this expansion with expanded freeway capacity that doesn’t worsen air pollution for Tubman students or the Albina neighborhood as a whole.

ODOT received a “Finding of No Significant Impact” from the federal government in late October 2020. In December at an ESC meeting, ODOT released new polling showing support for the Rose Quarter expansion. However, their messaging to engender support for the expansion used demonstrably false talking points pertaining to the project’s impacts on carbon emissions, traffic congestion, air pollution, and community engagement, as outlined in this document. This project is only popular if ODOT lies about the actual impacts it will have to our state budget, our children’s lungs, and the future they stand to inhabit - and elected officials have the opportunity to demand ODOT tell the truth about the consequences of this proposed expansion.

In February, *Willamette Week* reported that No More Freeways obtained copies of documents demonstrating that the Oregon Department of Transportation had been lying to the public for months about the width of the freeway.<sup>18</sup> No More Freeways asked questions about the width of this freeway to ODOT Rose Quarter staffers, the Oregon Transportation Commission, to the Executive Steering Committee meetings and Historic Albina Advisory Committee meetings. ODOT’s continued response was that the freeway was 126 feet wide - and that we’d need to file public records requests for proof. Unfortunately for ODOT, we had already obtained these renderings. No More Freeways found three documents each showing ODOT’s plans to build 160-foot wide freeway, wide enough for a full ten lane freeway. When Joe Cortright’s *City Observatory* published these documents and linked to where ODOT’s subcontractor’s own website included these renderings, these private businesses took down the files within a few days of the story publishing.<sup>19</sup>

This much-wider proposal suggests that the existing, abysmal traffic projection data that ODOT gave us in the Environmental Assessment published 2019 is severely

---

<sup>17</sup> The full letter signed by the 14 former CAC members can be seen here; it’s worth reading in full.

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nVdT4VBMZ6P-3TVDzFu\\_3wysU6c8frvs/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1nVdT4VBMZ6P-3TVDzFu_3wysU6c8frvs/view)

<sup>18</sup> “Questions About the Footprint of the I-5 Rose Quarter Project Intensify” *Willamette Week*, February 24, 2021

<https://www.wweek.com/news/2021/02/24/questions-about-the-footprint-of-the-i-5-rose-quarter-project-intensify/>

<sup>19</sup> “Revealed: ODOT’s Secret Plans for a 10-Lane Rose Quarter Freeway” *City Observatory*

<https://cityobservatory.org/revealed-odots-secret-plans-for-a-10-lane-rose-quarter-freeway/>



inaccurate, and that the carbon and air pollution impacts of the project are more significant. Once the freeway is built to this width, it'd be a simple, ministerial action avoiding any environmental review (or opportunity for recourse for the city) for ODOT to restripe a six lane freeway to add additional capacity. Moreover, by demanding such a wide right-of-way for the freeway below, ODOT is essentially preventing Albina Vision Trust from being able to win “buildable caps”, since the wider right-of-way makes these caps substantially more expensive and likely technically prohibitive for buildings on top.

### **The case against this expansion: climate, air pollution, traffic safety, environmental justice, won't solve congestion**

As we've detailed above, it's hard to overstate how much ODOT has bent over backwards to obfuscate major pertinent details of this project and avoid any public accountability or transparency. The agency has consistently ignored a significant, growing consensus of elected officials and community leaders who have been clamoring for the agency to conduct a full Environmental Impact Statement of the project for years. Despite years of agencies and advocate giving ODOT the benefit of the doubt, the agency has continued to. With the leadership and support from other elected officials and the grassroots coalition of community advocates, we can hold this agency accountable towards a project that meets our goals for climate action, transportation improvements, and restorative justice goals.

We also wanted to make sure we fully articulated what's at stake with this expansion.

**CLIMATE** - 40% of Oregon's carbon emissions come from transportation - this freeway expansion is nothing short of fossil fuel infrastructure that we should be working to retire, not expand. We simply cannot drive our way to lower carbon emissions - even with an adoption of electric vehicles much more aggressive than anyone could optimistically forecast, it simply won't be sufficient to hit our carbon reduction goals without providing new infrastructure to design our city, region and state around driving less and empowering more public transportation and shorter trips. We've been delighted by the ongoing collaboration between No More Freeways and Sunrise PDX to provide testimony and community support expressing the necessity of linking our transportation policies and investments to the urgent need to decarbonize.

**AIR POLLUTION AT TUBMAN:** There's also a substantial environmental justice issue regarding the air pollution at Harriet Tubman Middle School. Reopened to students in 2018, 69% of Tubman's enrollment identifies as nonwhite, with 74% on free



or reduced lunch.<sup>20</sup> The school already has some of the worst air pollution in the state - a report in 2018 released by Portland State University researchers suggested that Tubman students should forgo outdoor recess due to concerns about asthma caused by the proximity of the existing freeway.<sup>21</sup> Anecdotal evidence supports these claims, with numerous Tubman parents expressing concern about their children developing asthma since attending the newly reopened school, as reported by *The Portland Mercury*.<sup>22</sup> ODOT has deliberately hidden the extent to which this expansion moves the widened freeway closer to the school in their schematics of the project; No More Freeways created a video to visually demonstrate what the freeway would do to the school's backyard.<sup>23</sup> As articulated above, PPS has received minimal response from ODOT on their numerous stated concerns about how the construction of the project will impact the school, and has repeatedly asked for more clarity and engagement. However, No More Freeways did, through public records requests, find multiple documents suggesting ODOT intends to take further PPS property and move the expanded freeway even closer to the Tubman campus.

ABYSMAL SURFACE STREET PROPOSALS: Transportation advocates also found numerous flaws with the surface level improvements proposed. Service on numerous TriMet frequent service routes and the Portland Streetcar will be substantially hampered for years during construction, and when completed, these transit lines will actually operate slower through the Albina neighborhood, negating progress hard earned through prioritizing transit with dedicated lines through PBOT's ongoing Rose Lanes project to expedite bus travel. Removal of the Flint Avenue bridge will eliminate a crucial, well-used bike route through inner North Portland; ODOT's proposed replacement is indirect and very steep. The proposed traffic alignments on Broadway, Weidler, Vancouver, and Williams are clearly designed to prioritize movements of cars on and off the freeway over a safe, pleasant space for pedestrians and people biking. The ramps' turning radii, in particular, suggests plans for designing for fast-travelling cars that will make the neighborhood miserable for anyone attending events at the Moda Center.<sup>24</sup> It's worth noting that the Rose Quarter construction, with significant

---

<sup>20</sup>These enrollment demographics are pulled from the 2018-2019 academic school year; this citation is pulled from Public Comment submitted by Harriet Tubman PTSA to ODOT during Environmental Assessment, April 1 2019: <https://nomorefreewayspx.files.wordpress.com/2019/04/harrietubmanparents.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> PSU study on air pollution at Tubman:

[https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/4/PSU\\_Tubmanfinalreport.pdf](https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/4/PSU_Tubmanfinalreport.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> "How Will a Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion Impact a Historically Black Middle School?" *Portland Mercury* <https://www.portlandmercury.com/blogtown/2019/02/22/25985347/how-will-a-rose-quarter-freeway-expansion-impact-a-historically-black-middle-school>

<sup>23</sup> Our video is available here: <https://vimeo.com/284544611>

<sup>24</sup> Concerns about the specific proposed bike lanes and sidewalks were articulated at depth in the letters submitted by the City of Portland's Bicycle and Pedestrian Advisory Committees, in their respective letters asking for an Environmental Impact Statement. Joe Cortright wrote about the numerous concerns about the surface level proposals over at *City Observatory*: <https://cityobservatory.org/distorted-images-freeway-widening-is-bad-for-pedestrians/>





construction detours and delays, is currently planned to happen over the same time as Multnomah County's Burnside Bridge Replacement project, with significant, extended closures proposed to the Williams, Vancouver, Broadway and Wiedler bridges. These routes carry significant traffic for bicycles, numerous frequent service bus lanes, the Portland Streetcar and automobiles. Traffic will be a nightmare for multiple years, especially during evenings with events at the Moda Center.

ODOT has also previously tried to sell this freeway expansion as a "safety improvement." However, the stretch of freeway proposed for expansion hasn't seen a single traffic fatality in over a decade. Meanwhile, ODOT's arterials routinely are the most dangerous in the Portland region and the entire state. Regionally, it's depressingly predictable that numerous traffic fatalities continue on 82nd Avenue, SW Barbur, SE Powell, N/NE Lombard and Tualatin-Valley Highway. These orphan highways - all of them owned by ODOT - have suffered from decades of neglect and disinvestment, disproportionately burdening and endangering the largely low-income communities and communities of color that rely on them for daily needs. They are underfunded because ODOT continues to propose dumping billions into freeway expansions, and therefore claims poverty when asked by legislators or local leaders to maintain their existing roads. To quote Portland resident Michelle DuBarry's opinion piece that published in *the Oregonian* in March 2020:

*I don't know what political mountains need to be moved for the agency to repurpose that money, but I am hoping our local leaders and advocates can apply enough pressure to convince them to invest in real traffic safety. They might start with the intersection of North Lombard Street and North Interstate Avenue where my son was killed in his stroller on a two-block walk from our house to the grocery store.*

*If the state has nearly a billion dollars to invest in safety, surely we can do better than a freeway expansion.<sup>25</sup>*

Hundreds of Oregonians die every year from traffic violence - and ODOT robs us of valuable resources to address these unsafe streets around the state because the agency continues to plot on how to direct their revenue to freeways.

Criticism that the agency did not adequately design the Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion for modes of travel other than automobiles weren't just lobbied by advocates.

---

<sup>25</sup> "Opinion: ODOT's 'safety' project in Rose Quarter ignores state's deadliest roads" *The Oregonian*  
<https://www.oregonlive.com/opinion/2020/03/opinion-odots-safety-project-in-rose-quarter-ignores-states-deadliest-roads.html>



ODOT's own consultants apparently agree. A report published by ZGF Architects / ARUP in December 2020 on the feasibility of the highway caps eviscerated the agency for their technical planning decisions to severely prioritize automobile throughput over other modes of travel.<sup>26</sup> The report states "it can be concluded that the 15% design presents one solution for the criteria defined. This solution has prioritized vehicle traffic and has used highway widening as the primary approach to increasing safety and decreasing congestion....Traffic modelling does not fully demonstrate the congestion and safety benefit goals for I-5."

**WON'T SOLVE CONGESTION:** As cited above, ODOT's own hired consultants freely admit that this expansion won't do anything for traffic congestion, and their own data provided has been thoroughly debunked by reputable traffic engineers with decades of experience. Congestion pricing is the only policy option that will actively reduce trips taken, and therefore improve air pollution, congestion, and carbon emissions. ODOT has refused to directly study whether or not the desired reduction of traffic could be achieved by implementing congestion pricing ahead of freeway expansion, as we have been pushing. This could be a crucial requirement in a future EIS study - it would likely obviate the necessity of widening the freeway. This is why ODOT even refuses to study it.<sup>27</sup> A mandate for congestion pricing implementation was included in House Bill 2017, the same legislation that created funding for the expansion - despite ODOT's dodges and claims that congestion pricing is "too many years out," there's simply no reason we couldn't price this stretch of roadway before expansion, improving congestion, air pollution, carbon emissions, and creating revenue for other necessary infrastructure, including road improvements for the Albina neighborhood. We understand the good faith concerns about the equity implications of congestion pricing; we share the desire to see this policy implemented with frontline communities empowered to make decisions that reflect their needs, and our organization is eager to continue to help cultivate public support for congestion pricing as we have in the past.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> "Independent Assessment of Highway Covers for I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement (IARQ) Project" - document is accessible here: [http://www.albinahighwaycovers.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/20201211-Appendix-E-Technical-Design-Assessment\\_Accessible.pdf](http://www.albinahighwaycovers.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/20201211-Appendix-E-Technical-Design-Assessment_Accessible.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Joe Cortright's research at *City Observatory* shows how widening a freeway in Louisville, Kentucky before pricing it was clearly the wrong decision - the state DOT ended up spending billions on a widened freeway when, post pricing, the freeway saw less car traffic than before the expansion was built. There are obvious lessons for us here in Portland: <https://cityobservatory.org/congestion-pricing-is-a-better-solution-for-the-rose-quarter/>

<sup>28</sup> No More Freeways organized testimony in support of congestion pricing in 2018. One of the most important things that could happen for congestion pricing to truly serve the needs of vulnerable Oregonians would be to make sure that the revenue raised from pricing went towards transit service and investments, as opposed to giving ODOT more funds for freeway expansion. ODOT's tepid embrace of congestion pricing as a policy is predicated on their desire to create more revenue for freeway projects across the region. We believe using congestion pricing to fund freeway expansions is like using a carbon tax to raise revenue to build a coal plant; the point of the tax is to discourage a particular activity, and the revenue used should be to create alternatives to said activity, not fund infrastructure



It's hard to fathom why ODOT is able to credibly claim they care about congestion relief when the agency bends over backwards to avoid any potential scrutiny of studying congestion pricing ahead of freeway expansion.

**RESTORATIVE JUSTICE:** Finally, the question of restorative justice for the Albina neighborhood is clearly a top priority for the city. We have continued to build a working relationship with Albina Vision Trust throughout the past few years; we see our work with No More Freeways primarily as focused on stopping ODOT's expansion to let other organizations claim their moral authority over the future of the neighborhood. It's inarguable that the racist trespasses of urban renewal and freeway construction decimated the largest Black neighborhood in the state of Oregon; we aspire to uplift Albina Vision and other long standing community advocates as rightful heirs to the neighborhood on their own terms, as opposed to the continually slippery terms set by ODOT. We have plenty of thoughts about what this could look like, but as a normatively White organization, No More Freeways defers to other community leaders about their concerns about how air pollution, questionable decision-making structures, and lack of alternative studies reflect on the agency's stated commitment to restorative justice.

**Desired Outcome: Legislators use bully pulpit, join community advocates and local elected officials in demanding ODOT conduct a Full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion project**

The most important thing that elected officials could do to help ensure the future of the Rose Quarter ends with a happy ending and actually provide benefits to the community, region and state is to loudly demand that ODOT conduct a full Environmental Impact Statement on the Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion.

Getting ODOT to commit to a deeper study of the project creates a litany of opportunities for more collaboration with community leaders and key stakeholders, including Portland Public Schools, Albina Vision Trust, climate and transportation justice advocates. This enormous, expensive expansion is situated in some of the most economically valuable and historically significant land in the state. This is a once in a generation opportunity to demand that the state's values of racial justice, thoughtful economic development, climate leadership, and progressive transportation options are reflected in our mammoth investments in infrastructure to steward the growth and healing of this historic, trespassed, soon-to-be-revived neighborhood. We wish to see

---

encouraging more of it. Our letter in 2018 to ODOT's Value Pricing committee included language asked for this, as well as low-income exemptions, data privacy, and street safety improvements:

<https://nomorefreewayspx.files.wordpress.com/2018/04/043018-value-pricing-odot-letter-21.pdf>



ODOT's existing Environmental Assessment thrown out, and planning undertaken through an EIS process so that the project is shaped by a multiplicity of values - as opposed to, at present, ODOT exclusively prioritizing lanes of freeway over all other concerns and pitting other stakeholders against each other.

Furthermore, the political winds from the federal government appear to be rapidly changing. Nominated Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg has made numerous, unequivocal statements about the need for a reformation of federal transportation policy away from road projects and towards multimodal, holistic investments that acknowledge the racist past of transportation policy that bulldozed Black neighborhoods for freeways. There's even economic stimulus federal legislation proposed that includes a \$10 billion allocation for studying highway removal in American cities focused on racial justice and housing.<sup>29</sup> National advocacy group Transportation For America has also been working with the new administration and has proposed bigger, bold plans for creating structured, federal programs for the removal or decommissioning of urban freeways, with deliberate intention to empower BIPOC communities to self-determine how to rebuild after racist urban renewal from decades previous.<sup>30</sup> It's not outrageous to assume that, within this decade, federal programmatic support and funding could align to empower the City and state to work with groups like Albina Vision Trust to reclaim this neighborhood from the freeway entirely - especially if we begin to lay the groundwork for that alternative vision now with institutional support, and force ODOT to meaningfully study the benefits and costs. It's difficult to overstate how limitless the possibility is for this neighborhood in the century ahead - provided ODOT isn't given a carte blanche to widen this freeway. Whether or not you as an elected official approve of this idea, it seems as though we aren't meaningfully committing to restorative justice for the neighborhood if we're unable to even give community members the chance to ask ODOT to study the possibilities. A report released by Smart Growth America last April stated that government investments in transit, existing road maintenance and walkable communities created 70% more jobs than notoriously non-labor-intensive freeway projects.<sup>31</sup> There is just so much more public benefit and economic stimulus for Oregon's contractors and building trades - and economy - by directing ODOT to invest in alternatives to freeway expansion.

ODOT and project proponents are likely to counter that requiring an Environmental Impact Statement will cause time delays and cost overruns to the project. We'd respond that it's foolish the agency didn't conduct an Environmental

---

<sup>29</sup> "Senate Considering \$10B for Highway Removal" *Streetsblog.org*

<https://usa.streetsblog.org/2021/01/11/senate-considering-10b-highway-removal-bill/>

<sup>30</sup> Read Transportation for America's groundbreaking proposal, released in December 2020, here:

<https://t4america.org/2020/12/07/four-recommendations-to-undo-the-damage-of-urban-renewal/>

<sup>31</sup> Learning From the 2009 Recovery Act: Lessons and recommendations for future infrastructure stimulus - *Smart Growth America*

<https://smartgrowthamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/SGA-T4A-Lessons-from-the-2009-Stimulus.pdf>



Impact Statement in the first place, and it's incumbent on ODOT to demonstrate that they've conducted meaningful research and planning to ensure that this project is in line with our stated goals as a community. As documented above, ODOT has consistently taken every shortcut possible to evade public accountability and transparency every step of the way. The agency has consistently hidden their intentions from public scrutiny until FOIA requests proved otherwise. A full Environmental Impact Statement is the only way we can meaningfully force this agency to respond to community concerns about the expansion.

Besides, if the process of conducting a thorough EIS with empowered community support helps lead towards a proposal that actually addresses our climate, air pollution, restorative justice, and transportation goals without spending billions on a freeway expansion, the additional funding and delay is well spent. It will also give more time for community partners to coalesce around a shared alternative vision for the neighborhood, regardless of whether the additional lanes of freeway are ultimately included.

We will continue to track this project in the months and years ahead. There's simply too much on the line for ODOT's climate arsonist freeway expansions to go unchecked. We as advocates are proud of our accomplishments in the last few years to convince other community leaders and Portland-based local elected officials that ODOT is no longer trustworthy for the billions of freeways they are proposing around the state. No More Freeways is eager to meet with any elected official, regardless of current position on the proposed expansions or political party, to discuss opportunities for collaboration for imagining a better transportation future for our city, region and state.