

February 13, 2024

Representative Susan McLain
Senator Chris Gorsek
Joint Committee on Transportation
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

RE: SB 1572

Co-Chair McLain, Co-Chair Gorsek and Members of the Committee:

TriMet is Oregon's largest transit agency, providing more than 1.2 million trips per week to Oregonians across the tri-county Portland region. TriMet currently operates 80 bus lines, 1 Frequent Express bus rapid transit line, 5 MAX light rail lines, our LIFT paratransit service, and the WES commuter rail line. TriMet is neutral on SB 1572, but we have several clarifications and requests that we would like to put on the record.

Under TriMet's charter, we can't operate transit service outside of our service territory, and while we do operate WES, heavy passenger rail is not one of our core competencies. Should this project move forward, we strongly recommend that the Legislature create a new rail authority or other governance entity to oversee the operation of the WES line between Wilsonville and Salem. TriMet is not the appropriate entity to provide service along that corridor.

One of the issues that Senate Bill 1572 directs ODOT to study is increasing the frequency and hours of WES service. TriMet currently only run WES on weekdays during the morning and afternoon rush hours, with trains every 45 minutes. Part of the reason for those limited service hours is that we lease the tracks that WES uses from Portland and Western Railroad, and under the terms of our lease agreement with them, we are only allowed to run WES on those tracks during rush hour on weekdays.

The frequency of WES service is also limited because WES ridership is low and the operations and maintenance costs for heavy commuter rail are very high. TriMet has concerns about the opportunity cost of being directed to increase WES service between Beaverton and Wilsonville in conjunction with an extension of the WES to Salem. TriMet's priorities for our limited budget include expanding our bus service with a focus on low-income, high ridership areas, continuing our transition to a zero-emission bus fleet, and building a new bus rapid transit line on 82nd avenue. We want to make sure that the WES extension project would not result in pressure on TriMet to increase our investment in WES at the expense of these other priorities.

If the state does move forward with this project, TriMet would support the new governance entity taking over operation of the existing section of WES between Beaverton and Wilsonville as well. Having a single entity operate the entire WES system would likely result in smoother operation than service partially delivered by TriMet and partially delivered by another transportation provider.

TriMet currently operates WES under a 50-year lease agreement with Portland Western Railroad. We think that exploring the mechanics of transferring that lease to a new governance entity is an important part of any study of this proposed project.

Finally, ODOT has expressed some concerns about the December 2024 report back date in SB 1572 because this timeline will make it challenging for them to provide a thorough analysis and make informed recommendations for some of the major questions facing this project, including the proposed governance structure. TriMet believes that adequate time should be given to ODOT to study such a large and complex project before the legislature considers funding it.

TriMet supports expanding the high-capacity transportation options available to Oregonians, and we would be happy to consult with ODOT on study that incorporates these considerations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Miles Pengilly', is positioned above the typed name.

Miles Pengilly
State Government Affairs Manager
TriMet