

Bus or Rail Intercity Travel for Oregon?

Considerations for 2025 S.B. 1202 creation of Oregon Rail and Transit Department

Tom Bowerman, PolicyInteractive Research April 7, 2025

It is probably a good idea to create a unique Department of Rail and Transit, separated from ODOT. While it is worth asking if Oregon really needs another with 250 statewide Departments, Boards and Commissions, though it may also be justified as an act of participatory democracy. ODOT's ongoing lackluster fiscal, contracting and project management likely impairs legislative confidence in ODOT's sub-category of managing public transit.

On the topic of intercity transit, whether or not it's managed by ODOT or a new department, I want to point to the comparative viability of rail and bus, as they are dramatically different in cost, flexibility and reliability. A train vs. rail comparison within Oregon is easily obtained by studying the Eugene to Portland rail and bus routes because on this corridor each mode runs side by side multiple times per day, both under ODOT management. The ticket cost for the bus is \$17-20 per ticket with farebox revenue covering the full cost of operation while the train ticket is around \$23-32 which covers about 1/4th of the operating costs, the remainder subsidized by local, state and federal funds. The start to finish times for rail and bus are similar at 2.5-3 hours although the rail has a 50% lower on-time record than the bus. The ODOT Amtrak Point buses Eugene to Portland corridor are contracted by MTR Western feel new and comfortable and with a little tweaking could make the travel time on-par with a private automobile. Both train and bus schedules are sequenced in approximate two hour intervals between approximately 5AM departure to 10PM arrival.

Some people advocate for high speed rail although high speed rail is currently impossible due high cost estimates \$200 million per mile with near Portland being significantly higher due topography and right of way. Present federal funding is more likely to be diminished.. Contemporary low speed rail has a different set of difficulties:

- Passenger rail on Union Pacific heavy freight track limits speeds and causes delays,
- Improving existing track does little to improve speeds due to freight-passenger congestion,
- New right of way and rail installation is expensive which still faces grade level crossings,
- Travel time on rail is 50% longer than direct I-5 freeway travel (3 hours vs. 2 hours),
- Rail delays over 15 minutes above schedule occur more than 40% of the time,
- Insufficient ridership to justify needed rail investments,
- Current available ticket fare box covers just 20% of passenger rail expenses, requiring subsidies
- If Federal subsidies disappear, Oregon commuter rail will experience a huge fiscal hit.

Meanwhile, the Oregon Point Amtrak bus system exhibits many positive traits compared to Amtrak Cascades Rail. Based on comparative analysis the Point bus service exhibits:

- Profitability from fare box at lower cost per passenger mile than rail,
- Greater geographic coverage and flexibility of routes and intermodal integration,
- Over 80% departure/destination on-time,
- Point buses are clean, modern coaches,
- Greater flexibility to add route frequency, directness of route and scheduling,
- Intermodal connectivity more flexible than legacy rail stations.

There is considerable opportunity to improve the rider experience and expand ridership on the Point style bus system. Primary components for high ridership include:

- **Reliability & Frequency:** minimizing wait times and confidence of destination arrive time.
- **Price:** saving on cost of private vehicle cost, maintenance, operation and parking.
- **Convenience:** ease of ticket purchase, clarity of arrival-departure, and inter-modal connectivity.
- **Comfort:** comfortable seating, clean coaches, adequate space, relaxation to read, sleep or sightsee.
- **Safety:** feeling secure and safe in professionally operated vehicle, well-lit stops, responsive staff and security.
- **Intermodal connections:** convenient well-timed connections transition to other routes and destinations.

Convenient High capacity self-supporting public transit probably includes:

- Expanded Point Bus system, no matter what the Oregon legislature or federal decisions do about rail.
- Incrementally increased route frequency on populated routes as ridership justifies, for example Eugene-Portland moving toward 1 hour, then 30 min., then 15 minute intervals.
- Intra-Oregon regional transit links including Ashland-Portland, Ontario-Portland and Klamath Falls-Portland initially once a day with increased frequency as ridership participation and location supports.
- As with 20 other US jurisdictions, allow buses to travel on interstate highway apron when traffic congestion slows traffic speed below 35 MPH..
- Use contemporary internet technology to easily: purchase tickets, check-in passenger, obtain location progress or delays on rider's assigned bus and other interactive information.
- Bypass distant off-route legacy terminals by providing safe sheltered mini-terminals with amenities located beside main road integrated with intermodal connections to urban centers to minimize time consuming detour.
- High frequency routes in between high population terminals have designate "Express" so that riders can select nonstop travel between two main city centers.

Significantly increased public transit can reduce automobile traffic on increasingly congested roadways. The Amtrak-Point bus Eugene to Portland ridership grew by more than 30% from 2022-2023 in part due to increasingly congested I-5. Point Buses reportedly average 80% passenger capacity which individually supplants about 35 cars per bus. The present Portland-Salem roadway is currently operating at or above maximum from 2-5 PM; increasing bus density can reduce costly freeway expansion as well as destination city parking demands.

With time, much higher bus frequency on the I-5 corridor, high ridership can improve or justify the prospect for a high speed rail integrated into the existing interstate highway right of way. The vision of a 120 MPH passenger rail integrated with intermodal connections between Eugene and Portland begins to look viable when ridership .

Feedback may be directed to: tom@policyinteractive.org

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