

Submitter: John Russell
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Joint Committee On Transportation
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB1202

Chair and Members of the Committee,

I write today as someone who cares deeply about improving the future of all modes of transportation in Oregon—especially passenger rail and public transportation—which is one of many reasons that I am proud of my work as a state employee. I fully support stronger investment in rail, but I urge caution on SB 1202's proposal to create a new agency.

ODOT's Public Transportation Division (PTD) already attracts some of the agency's most visionary, capable staff. Rather than improving outcomes, pulling them into a separate agency all but guarantees increased overhead costs and risks weakening ODOT's ability to deliver on legislative priorities without necessarily guaranteeing better rail service. While I want to be clear that I am speaking personally on my own time, many of us in the agency benefit from regular collaboration with PTD staff—breaking that connection diminishes our shared capacity to deliver multimodal solutions. In summary, SB 1202 does not necessarily make Oregon rail better, but it will undoubtedly leave ODOT worse off.

If the goal is to expand Oregon's rail and transit systems, why not charge ODOT with doing exactly that by empowering PTD with additional dedicated funding streams for passenger rail and public transit? As someone who has the privilege of working with many of the state's best and brightest public servants, we know firsthand that the state's transportation "muscle" already exists—we should be leveraging it, not sidelining it. Worse, creating a new agency sends the message that rail and transit aren't "real transportation," and it implicitly gives ODOT permission to ignore these critical modes altogether when they are needed most.

Let's invest in outcomes, not overhead. Don't build a new agency—build a better ODOT.

Sincerely,
John Russell, PE
Portland, Oregon

[All views and opinions expressed are my own and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of my employer or other entities on whose advisory committees I may serve]