

Submitter: Aaron Golub
On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Transportation
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB1542

Dear Chair Gorsek and members of the Senate Transportation Committee.

My name is Aaron Golub, I live in Portland and am a Professor of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University. I am testifying in support of Senate Bills 1542 and 1543. My support is informed by 28 years of experience as a transportation researcher, consultant, teacher, and advocate. Together, these bills strengthen transportation decision-making in Oregon.

Senate Bill 1542 creates a clear, performance-based structure for transportation investment. Oregon has significant backlogs in preservation, bridge repair, and safety improvements, yet funding has too often been directed toward large new projects without consistent comparison to lower-cost investments that may deliver greater public benefit.

By requiring a 10-year capital investment plan, explicit statewide goals, and a transparent project scoring system based on safety, maintenance, climate outcomes, accessibility, and cost-effectiveness, SB 1542 helps ensure that investments are aligned with what Oregonians actually need from their transportation system.

Equally important, the bill creates real accountability. If the state is not making sufficient progress toward its goals, the funding priorities must adjust in the next cycle. Public reporting, condition assessments, and accessible data will allow legislators and communities to clearly see what outcomes transportation spending is producing. This is a practical, fix-it-first, outcomes-driven approach grounded in widely recognized best practices in transportation planning.

Oregon is not alone in this challenge of statewide transportation programming. The Brookings Institute issued a recent report called “Connecting the DOTs: A survey of state transportation planning, investment, and accountability practices.” It explored and evaluated DOT planning and programming activities across the country. The report laments that “states typically detach the programming of funds from their long-range planning … a disconnect that enables state DOTs to invest in projects without aligning their spending to published goals and performance targets.” The report scored state DOTs along an array of dimensions. While Oregon scored high on its planning activities (noted by many of the testimony already today), it only scored 2.5 out of 4 for its project selection – many states do much better in closing the loop between planning and capital programming and project selection. I think this bill will certainly strengthen that area.

Senate Bill 1543 addresses the financial side of the equation. Over the past two decades, transportation debt service has increased dramatically—far faster than revenues—reducing the funding available for essential preservation, seismic resilience, and safety projects. In effect, past borrowing decisions are increasingly determining today's priorities. This pattern that Oregon has fallen into haunts many states that lead them into a vicious spiral where they cannot keep up with basic maintenance.

SB 1543 establishes Oregon's first comprehensive transportation debt management policy, strengthens oversight by the OTC, limits annual debt service to a sustainable share of highway resources, and requires full transparency about repayment schedules, total borrowing costs, pledged revenues, and opportunity costs before new debt is approved. These are prudent guardrails that protect both current taxpayers and future generations while still allowing strategic investment when it is truly warranted. And since the ODOT speaker on 2/9 claimed they are already meeting these goals, then this proposal should not create much of a burden while also strengthening oversight.

Thank you for your time and for your service to our state.

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