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QuickPoint! – Let’s Build Some Highways

By John A. Charles, Jr.

Oregon stopped building new highways in 1983 when I-205 was completed. Top planning officials began espousing a philosophy of spending money on rail transit rather than roads. The government also used the power of zoning to crowd more people into urban centers, in the belief that high density would lead to less reliance on cars.

The new strategy failed.

The Portland regional transit agency, TriMet, was given more than \$3.6 billion to build a light rail system; yet between 1997 and 2016, TriMet’s market share of all commute trips in Portland fell from 12% to 10%. As a result, traffic congestion has become a major barrier to regional mobility.

Now a bipartisan group of legislators, led by Republican Rich Vial of Wilsonville and Democrat Brian Clem of Salem, has introduced a bill that would jump-start the highway-building process. HB 3231 would authorize cities and counties to jointly form special districts for the purpose of building and operating limited-access public highways.

If built, such highways would likely be financed through loans, with debt service paid off by tolls.

So far HB 3231 has not received a public hearing. It should. Motorists deserve all the highways they are willing to pay for. Let’s give them a chance to vote with their dollars for a better road system.

John A. Charles, Jr. is President and CEO of Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon’s free market public policy research organization.