

QuickPoint! • TriMet Board Should Focus on the Crisis at Hand, Not Unwelcome Expansion

By John A. Charles, Jr.

On November 12, the TriMet Board will hold their Board [Retreat](#) at Gresham City Hall. In reviewing their [agenda](#), the first thing you'd notice is what's missing: the lack of urgency in addressing the District's deteriorating financial condition. Operating losses in 2024 were \$850 million.

The only agenda item to mention money is titled "Financial Scorecard Update" and "Federal Grants Update." The District's problems go far beyond keeping score of revenue and expenses.

According to TriMet's financial reports, every important metric related to productivity, cost-effectiveness, and financial sustainability has steadily declined since 2015.

A small cross-section shows a consistent decline in fare revenue—down 52 percent. Also down are originating rides by 28 percent; while system farebox recovery is down 8 percent from a previous 34 percent.

The only thing going up, however, are taxes and bureaucracy. TriMet's tax revenue is up 75 percent, labor cost up 86 percent, and full-time employees (FTE) up 19 percent. Administrative and "other" FTE is up 88 percent.

As previously mentioned, their bottom-line operating loss in 2024 was \$850 million.

Not to be discouraged, however, TriMet keeps on planning to expand light rail service into Washington State, whose express bus service to Portland is already superior to light rail.

TriMet is also planning a \$350 million capital project on 82nd Avenue, most of which involves studies, paint, and barriers, dedicating lanes to transit and implementing a road diet to reduce lane access for cars.

Wednesday's agenda should focus solely on the crisis at hand: how to reduce costs and raise revenue.

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All indications show that TriMet does not have a minimum farebox recovery standard. It should. Riders should be willing to pay at least 50 percent of operating costs in the near term and increase those fares over time. If not, then TriMet does not have a viable business.

TriMet has now become so expensive that it would make sense to shut down the lowest-performing lines, reduce the FTE count, maintain the handful of lines with robust ridership, and help low-income riders by issuing them the equivalent of an Oregon Trail EBT card for use with ride-hailing services.

My advice to the TriMet board is to use their time wisely this week. Although they've kicked the can down the road so far, that road is coming to an end. When it comes to strategic planning, procrastination is not a strategy.

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