

QuickPoint! Metro Study: Regional Passenger Rail Wrong Fit for Portland

By Naomi Inman with Letter by John A. Charles, Jr.

This week, Cascade Policy Institute president **John Charles** sent a letter to the members of Oregon's House and Senate about Metro's [Regional Rail Futures Study](#), prepared in response to a 2024 legislative mandate in [Senate Bill 5701](#), Section 503.

SECTION 503. In addition to and not in lieu of any other appropriation, there is appropriated to the Department of Transportation, for the biennium ending June 30, 2025, out of the General Fund, the amount of \$500,000, for distribution to the metropolitan service district organized under ORS chapter 268 to study the use of existing heavy freight rail assets in the Portland metropolitan area for passenger rail alternatives to existing transportation modes.

John attached a published [report](#) by Cascade adjunct scholar, Randal O'Toole, who reviewed the study which identifies major problems with regional passenger rail in the Portland area, including high operating costs, the need for major infrastructure improvements, congestion on existing freight lines, limited high-ridership along many corridors, and weak ridership prospects in some corridors.

Yet despite those findings, Metro declined to rule out regional rail and instead continued to encourage large-scale rail-oriented investments and additional land-use changes near freight corridors.

That approach reflects a larger planning problem. Portland-area transit has long been organized around downtown as the central hub, even though downtown now represents a small share of regional jobs compared with a century ago. In today's metropolitan economy, over 90 percent are dispersed across the region, not centered on downtown Portland. A transit strategy built around fixed rail and a single dominant hub does not match reality.

A more practical approach would focus on improving bus service and designing a network that better serves the region as it exists today, including suburban employment centers and other major destinations outside downtown. Buses are more flexible, less expensive, and better suited to adapting to changing travel patterns than rail.

John's [letter](#) and supporting [report](#) asks legislators to give careful consideration about whether state support for regional passenger rail is justified in light of Metro's own findings.

[READ JOHN CHARLES LETTER TO OREGON LEGISLATORS ON REGIONAL RAIL STUDY](#)

[READ RANDAL O'TOOLE'S REPORT, "A REVIEW OF METRO'S REGIONAL PASSENGER RAIL FUTURES STUDY"](#)

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