

The Honorable Oregon Senator or Representative
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court St. NE
Salem, Oregon 97301

Dear Oregon Legislator:

Metro recently released its [Regional Rail Futures Study](#), which was written in response to a 2024 legislative mandate, [Senate Bill 5701](#), Section 503. The study found five strikes against regional rail: it has “high operating costs”; would often require “significant infrastructure improvements”; many of the rail lines are already congested with more than 30 freight trains a day; less than 20 percent of the land in the corridors has “high ridership generating land uses”; and “some corridors” are not going to attract many riders.

Despite these negative findings, Metro refused to rule out regional rail as a transportation strategy for the Portland area. Instead, it encouraged the state to “consider connections to areas outside the Portland region,” such as Salem; support “transformative investments like Cascade High Speed Rail” and a MAX tunnel through downtown Portland; and support Metro’s efforts to increase more dense development within a half mile of rail freight corridors.

As shown in the attached report by transportation policy analyst Randal O’Toole, these recommendations betray Metro’s failure to understand how transportation works in modern cities. TriMet’s route map is strongly focused on downtown as its sole regional hub. While TriMet carries close to 30 percent of downtown employees to work, less than 5 percent of workers in the rest of the urban area commute by transit.

A single downtown hub made sense in 1900 when most jobs were downtown. However, just before the pandemic, less than 10 percent of Portland-area jobs were located downtown, and today it is probably closer to 6 percent. Most of the money spent on transit improvements in the last 50 years has foolishly focused on a downtown area that has steadily declined in importance relative to the rest of the region.

Metro’s densification plans for Portland will not solve this problem. Density makes housing less affordable and increases traffic congestion, yet it does little to boost transit ridership. The Portland urban area has about 4,400 people per square mile and transit carried 1.3 percent of motorized travel in 2024. The densest urban area in the United States has about 7,500 people per square mile, yet only 1.4 percent of motorized travel in that area was by transit.

Instead of trying to make Portland look like cities did 125 years ago, Metro should redesign transit to work in the Portland area as it is today. This means using buses, not trains, as buses are faster, more flexible, and can move more people per hour at a far lower cost than rail. It also means designing a route map that serves suburban edge cities, such as Hillsboro, Tualatin, and the area near the airport as well as TriMet currently serves downtown Portland.

Please feel free to contact me or Mr. O’Toole (rot@ti.org) if you have any questions about the attached report.

Yours truly,



John A. Charles, Jr.

