

*The Portland Transportation Disaster:
The High Cost of Anti-Auto
Planning in Portland*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Portland's transportation system is experiencing a profound and measurable decline. Over the past four decades, congestion has surged, transit ridership has collapsed, and traffic fatalities have risen sharply—even as Portland and Metro have spent hundreds of millions of dollars on transportation planning. The data show that these outcomes are not accidental but are the predictable result of policies explicitly designed to suppress automobile use, despite the fact that automobiles carry more than 95% of all passenger travel in the region.

Rather than plan for the mode that overwhelmingly serves residents' needs, Portland and Metro have focused almost exclusively on transit, walking, and cycling—modes that together account for less than 5% of passenger-miles. The region has not built a new freeway since 1983 and has instead pursued strategies that reduce roadway capacity, slow traffic, and intentionally increase congestion. These policies have failed to reduce driving, failed to improve transit performance, and failed to deliver environmental or safety benefits.

The evidence shows that automobility remains essential to economic opportunity, equity, and household well-being. Cars provide access to many times more jobs and services than transit, at lower cost per passenger-mile, and with far greater flexibility—especially for low-income residents. Meanwhile, decades of federal regulation have made automobiles dramatically cleaner and safer, reducing toxic emissions by more than 90% and cutting fatality rates by over 75%.

Portland's current approach has also undermined safety. Since the adoption of Vision Zero in 2015, traffic fatalities have nearly tripled in the city, with most pedestrian deaths occurring on non-freeway arterials at night and involving homeless or intoxicated individuals—conditions that speed-limit reductions cannot fix.

This report concludes that Portland's transportation crisis is not inevitable. It is the result of policy choices. A data-driven strategy—one that improves vehicles and roadways rather than restricting them—offers a far more effective path to reducing emissions, improving safety, and restoring mobility for all Portlanders.

INTRODUCTION

Transportation in the Portland urban area is a disaster. Between 1982 and 2024, the number of hours Portland-area residents waste sitting in traffic each year has [octupled](#). The amount of fuel wasted by congestion per year has nearly quintupled. The share of Portland-area commuters taking transit has declined from [9.8 percent](#) in 1980 to [5.0 percent](#) in 2024. According to the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#), between 2010 and 2024, the number of people killed in traffic accidents in urban Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington counties grew by 159 percent while the number in the city of Portland grew by 150 percent.

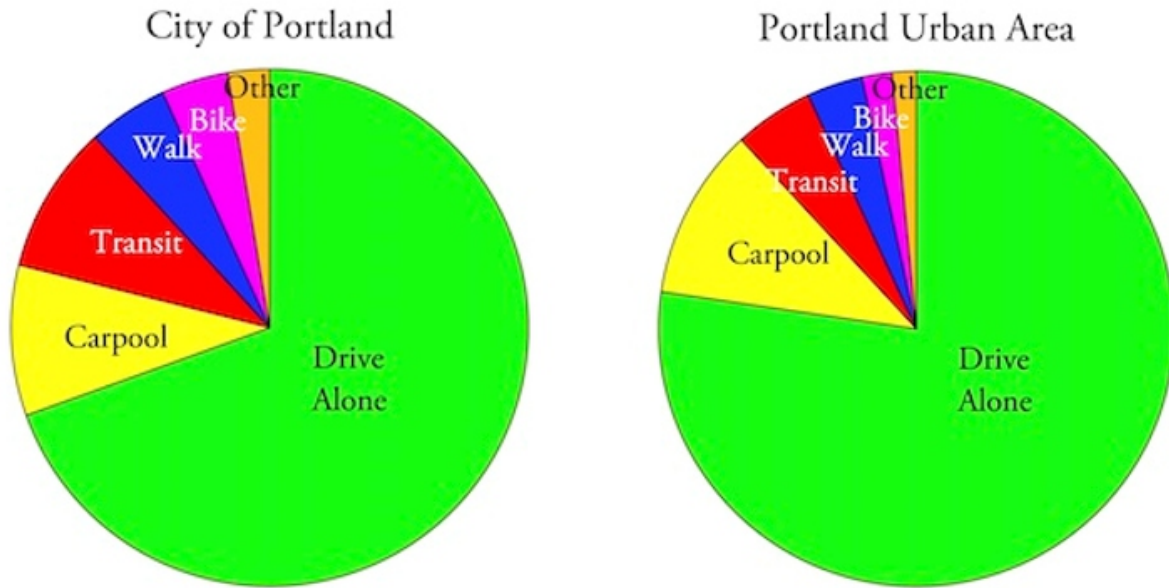
These disastrous outcomes have taken place despite the city of Portland and Metro, Portland's regional planning agency, spending hundreds of millions of dollars on transportation planning in the past several decades. More accurately, most of these problems happened *because* of Portland and Metro's transportation planning.

More than 95 percent of passenger travel in the Portland urban area is by automobile. According to data published by the Department of Transportation, prior to the pandemic, residents of the Portland urban area traveled more than 50 miles by automobile for every mile they rode urban transit. As of 2024 that has increased to 75 miles. Exact mileage of walking and bicycling are more difficult to estimate but based on available data it appears that they account for no more than 2 to 3 percent of passenger-miles of travel while less than 1.5 percent is by transit.

While there are no good numbers on total pedestrian and bicycle travel, the Census Bureau's annual *American Community Survey* provides data on how [commuters get to work](#). Within the Portland urban area, 88 percent of commuting is by automobile, 5 percent transit, 3 percent walk, 2 percent bicycle, and about 1 percent take taxi, shared rides, motorcycles, or scooters. Within the city of Portland, 79 percent commute by automobile, 9 percent by transit, 5 percent walk, 4 percent by bicycle, and 2 percent take taxis, shared rides, motorcycles, or scooters.

Auto trips tend to be longer than transit, pedestrian, or bicycle trips, so in terms of passenger-miles automobiles make an even larger share of commuting. Automobiles also make up a larger share of non-commuter travel than commuter trips, so 95 percent of total travel appears to be accurate.

Figure 1



These charts show how people in the city of Portland and the Portland urban area commuted to work in 2024. In both the city and the region, driving accounted for the vast majority of commuting. Driving accounts for an even larger share of non-commute travel, and when measured by passenger-miles, driving represents about 95 percent of passenger travel. Source: 2024 American Community Survey.

Even though transit, walking, and bicycle riding make up no more than 4 or 5 percent of total passenger travel in the Portland urban area, nearly 100 percent of passenger transportation planning is focused on transit, walking, and cycling. To the extent that any planning is done for auto travel, it is negative planning: all of it aims at reducing such travel.

For example, Metro's Regional Transportation Plan includes a [Transit Strategy](#) to guide regional spending on the form of transportation that carries 1.5 percent of passenger travel; an [Active Transportation Strategy](#) to guide spending for pedestrians and bicycle riders who make up less than 3 percent of passenger travel; and a [Freight Strategy](#) to deal with the movement of freight in and out of the region (but that says little about the movement of freight to consumers within the region). However, the plan does not include an Automobile Strategy to deal with the form of transportation that moves at least 95 percent of the region's passenger travel.

This is mirrored by the Portland Bureau of Transportation's [Transportation System Plan](#). That plan includes a citywide pedestrian plan, a bicycle plan, an enhanced transit corridors plan, a Safe Routes to School plan to make it safer for children to walk and bicycle to school, a light-rail plan for the Southwest Corridor, a “growing transit communities” plan, a streetcar plan, a freight master plan, and a plan for oversized trucks. The only plan for

automobiles is a Vision Zero plan that aims to make streets safer by reducing the speed of auto travel.

The reason why Portland and Metro don't have automobile plans is they don't think they need them. The [last new freeway](#) to open in Portland was completed in 1983, and neither the city nor Metro want any more freeways or expansions of existing freeways. Instead, they want to reduce the capacity of the region's road networks to carry automobiles by turning shared lanes over to buses (as in the 82nd Avenue plan) or bicycles (such as Southwest 4th Avenue).

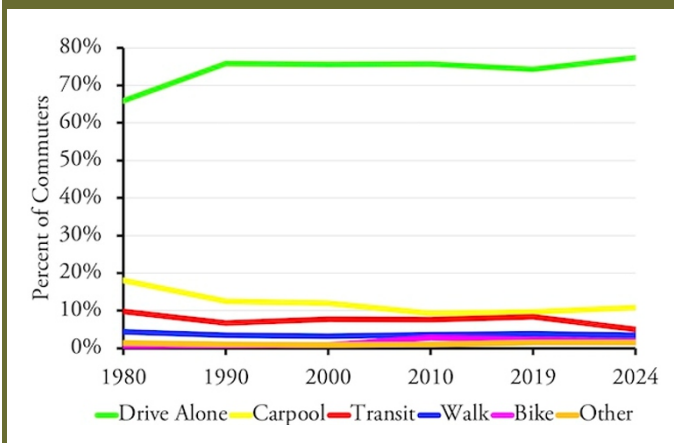
These anti-automobile policies are partly based on a state goal of [reducing per capita driving](#) from 2019 levels by 25 percent by 2030 and 30 percent by 2045. But Portland and Metro anti-auto policies preceded the adoption of that target by several decades.

There are three problems with these anti-automobile policies. First, they don't work. Portland and Metro have been following these policies since at least the 1990s yet have had little impact on driving. Second, anti-auto policies ignore the huge benefits produced by automobility. Finally, anti-auto policies ignore the possibility that the problems with automobiles can be better solved by making better automobiles, not by reducing the use of those autos.

ANTI-AUTOMOBILE POLICIES DON'T WORK

Portland's anti-automobile policies have been around at least to some extent since the 1980s, when the region stopped building freeways and started building light rail. Between 1980 and 2019, the share of commuters who drove alone to work in the Portland urban area grew from 66 percent to 74 percent, while the share who take transit declined from 9.8 percent to 8.4 percent. The share who bicycle to work grew from 0.7 to 2.3 percent, but this was mostly at the expense of a decline in transit and walking.

Figure 2: Commuting in the Portland Urban Area



Despite Portland and Metro's anti-auto, pro-transit policies, transit's share of commuting declined, and the automobile's share grew between 1980 and 2019, transit that were accelerated by the growth in working at home.

The pandemic, of course, greatly increased the number of people working at home. Downtown workers were among the most likely to end up working at home, and because downtown was also where most transit commuters worked, the increase in remote working had an outsized effect on transit. By 2024, 77 percent of commuters drove alone to work while only 5 percent took transit. The share of workers walking or cycling both also declined, with walking in particular falling below what it had been in 1980.

It might be argued that the effects of the pandemic on the number of people working at home were beyond the control of Portland transportation planners. But it could equally be argued that that is the real problem with Portland planning. Planners had a static view of the economy in which large numbers of people worked downtown and so they focused the region's transit system on downtown. In fact, downtown had been declining in importance for decades, a decline that was merely accelerated by the pandemic. By failing to acknowledge that decline, planners made it impossible for transit to respond to changes in transportation patterns.

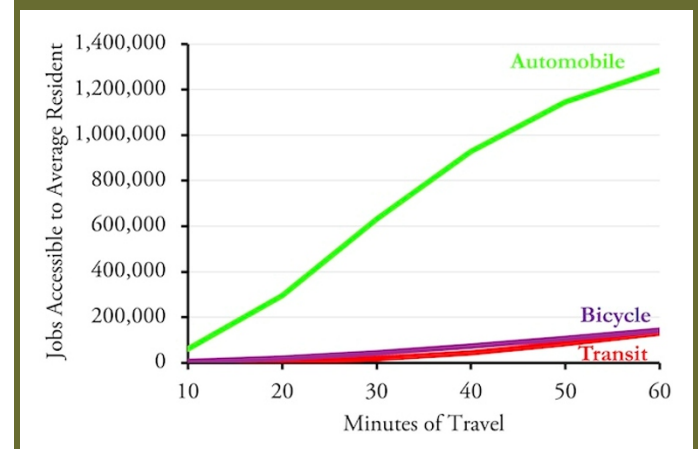
While the share of commuters who drive alone to work grew between 2019 and 2024, the total number of auto commuters declined by 7 percent because many worked at home in 2024. Yet this decline didn't help reduce vehicle miles of driving per capita because people who work at home still drive a lot, they just do so during other hours of the day. Between 2019 and 2024, per capita driving actually increased by 12 percent, making it practically impossible for the region to reach the 25 percent reduction target by 2025.

ANTI-AUTO POLICIES IGNORE THE BENEFITS OF AUTOMOBILES

Two fundamental assumptions behind Portland transportation plans are that auto driving poses a net cost on society while other forms of transportation—particularly transit, walking, and cycling—are more sustainable and more equitable. Neither of these assumptions are true.

Auto driving generates huge benefits for individuals in the Portland area and for the region as a whole. The most important benefit is in the ability of automobiles to efficiently provide door-to-door access to far more economic resources than any other form of travel.

Figure 3: Portland Urban Area Job Accessibility



Researchers at the University of Minnesota calculate that the average resident of the Portland urban area can reach ten times as many jobs in a 60-minute auto trip as in a 60-minute transit trip, and more than 60 times as many jobs in a 20-minute auto trip as in a 20-minute transit trip. In fact, people can reach well over twice as many jobs in a 20-minute auto trip as transit riders can reach in 60 minutes.

Portland-area transit is so poor that someone on a bicycle can reach more jobs in trips of 10 to 60 minutes than

someone taking transit. However, bicycling still doesn't come close to driving, as an automobile can reach 9 times as many jobs in 60 minutes and 15 times as many in 20 minutes as a bicycle. While these numbers apply to jobs, the proportions would be similar for other economic opportunities such as retail shops. Increased mobility also gives people access to better housing.

Automobiles are also the most economical form of travel for most urban-length trips. While nothing is less expensive than walking, walking is too slow for most urban trips. Automobiles are not only faster than transit, they can be much less expensive.

In 2024, Americans spent an average of 36.4¢ per passenger-mile driving their cars. Highway subsidies add up to about 1.6¢ per passenger-mile, for a total cost of 38¢ per passenger-mile. In 2024, transit agencies collected an average of 30¢ per passenger-mile from riders, but subsidies to transit were more than \$2.20 per passenger-mile.

While transit riders have little ability to vary the fares they are required to pay, auto users have several ways to reduce their costs. One is to carry more people. The above costs assume an average auto occupancy of about 1.5 people per car. An average vehicle carrying 2 or more people costs less to buy and operate per passenger-mile than transit.

Another way is to buy used cars rather than new ones and choose less expensive models, including vehicles that are more fuel efficient. The average cost of a new car today is around [\\$50,000](#), but some new cars sell for [less than half](#) of that. In 2000, the average car on the road was nine years old, but by 2025 this had increased to [14.5 years](#), suggesting that people can buy used reliable vehicles at relatively low cost. Any of these techniques can reduce the cost of driving to well below 30¢ per passenger-mile.

Automobiles are both efficient and an egalitarian form of travel. Someone who paid \$5,000 for a used Nissan Versa gets the same access to the roads as someone who paid \$500,000 for a new Rolls-Royce Cullinan.

Metro has a [mobility policy](#) that aims to deal with the fact that its climate strategy of reducing vehicle-miles of driving will hurt low-income people the most. Metro's solution is to provide more transit, pedestrian, and bicycle facilities, and to build more mixed-use developments so people don't need to drive to jobs or shops.

Like so many other Metro policies, this one is doomed to fail. As the job accessibility chart shows, transit is simply no substitute for driving when it comes to having access to jobs and other economic resources. This will be true no matter how much money the region spends on transit. Even in New York, the most transit-intensive urban area in the country,

automobiles can reach far more jobs than transit.

Nor will dense and mixed-use developments have much of an impact on equity. A [literature review](#) of the effects of urban form on travel by University of California, Irvine, economist David Brownstone concluded that most studies that found a relation between the two failed to account for self-selection; that is, that some people choose to live in dense or mixed-use developments in order to drive less. After accounting for self-selection, Brownstone concluded, the relationship between urban form and driving was “too small to be useful” in reducing greenhouse gas emissions. A corollary is that forcing people to live in dense, mixed-use developments won't change their mobility needs.

Low-income Portlanders understand the value of auto driving. According to the *American Community Survey*, [60 percent](#) of Portland-area residents who earn less than \$25,000 a year drove alone to work in 2024 while 11 percent carpooled. Only 6.6 percent rode transit. These numbers do not greatly differ from those for the Portland area as a whole.

Because they recognize the value of driving, nearly [92 percent](#) of all people in the Portland area live in a household with at least one automobile. Moreover, [21 percent](#) of workers who say they have no vehicles in their households nevertheless drive alone to work (mainly in employer-supplied vehicles) while another 5 percent carpool, thus reducing even further the people who have no access to vehicles.

The *American Community Survey* data indicate that about 43,000 workers in the Portland urban area live in households with no vehicles, but 8,000 of them drive alone to work, presumably in employer-supplied vehicles. The data do not indicate the incomes of the remaining 35,000 workers but do say that about 31,000 workers who earn less than \$25,000 a year take transit, walk, or get to work by “other” means (including bicycles, motorcycles, taxis, and ridesharing).

In addition, between [114,000 and 150,000](#) workers live in households that have fewer vehicles than they have workers. Many of those people carpool, but carpooling is problematic if two people in a household have jobs located opposite directions from their home.

Instead of forcing low-income people to be second-class citizens whose mobility is far more limited than those who can afford automobiles, a true mobility and equity policy would aim to increase auto ownership in low-income households. Numerous studies have found that increasing auto ownership is one of the most effective ways to reduce poverty. One [study](#) found that increasing minority auto ownership rates to those of whites would reduce the black-white employment gap by 45 percent. [Other studies](#) have

found that helping low-income people obtain a car made it likely that they would find better jobs, better housing, and were less likely to fall back into poverty. A [paper](#) by a Portland State University researcher found that people who didn't have a high school diploma were four times more likely to have a job and earned significantly more money if they had a car.

A paper titled “the [Poverty of the Carless](#)” observed that people in dense cities such as New York might be able to live without cars and many planners (such as those at Metro) are trying to rebuild cities such as Portland to be more like New York. This, the researchers said, would take many years if it were possible at all. Instead, the paper concluded, “The simplest way to eliminate this disparity [in mobility] may be to provide auto access.” “Planners should see vehicles,” the paper concludes, “as essential infrastructure, and work to close gaps in vehicle access.”

One of the biggest obstacles to auto ownership for most low-income people is not the cost of driving but the cost of obtaining a loan to buy a reliable vehicle. For automobile loans, banks typically charge people who have poor credit ratings [10 to 12 percent](#) higher interest rates than people with good credit ratings. People who need to borrow money to buy a used car can expect to pay another 6 percent interest. These high interest rates can increase the cost of the car by 50 percent.

Metro and Portland can address this by offering low-interest loans to low-income people seeking to buy an automobile. They can make this policy climate-friendly by specifying that such cars either be electric or get more than, say, 50 miles per gallon. The all-electric [Chevrolet Bolt](#) and the hybrid electric [Toyota Prius](#), which gets 54 miles per gallon, both start at under \$30,000.

Portland's [\\$1.7 billion clean energy fund](#) could buy nearly 60,000 electric or high-miles-per-gallon vehicles. The city is currently considering spending \$75 million of this fund—enough to buy 2,600 electric or high-miles-per-gallon vehicles—on rebuilding the Moda Center, which has nothing to do with clean energy. Rather than spending that money on the Moda Center, it should be put into a revolving fund and used to give low-interest loans to low-income people seeking to buy a climate-friendly vehicle.

IMPROVING AUTOS AND HIGHWAYS WORKS BETTER THAN TRYING TO REDUCE DRIVING

The social costs of auto driving were admittedly high in 1970. Gas guzzling cars averaged just [13.0 miles per gallon](#). Toxic air pollution [blanketed](#) the city of Portland,

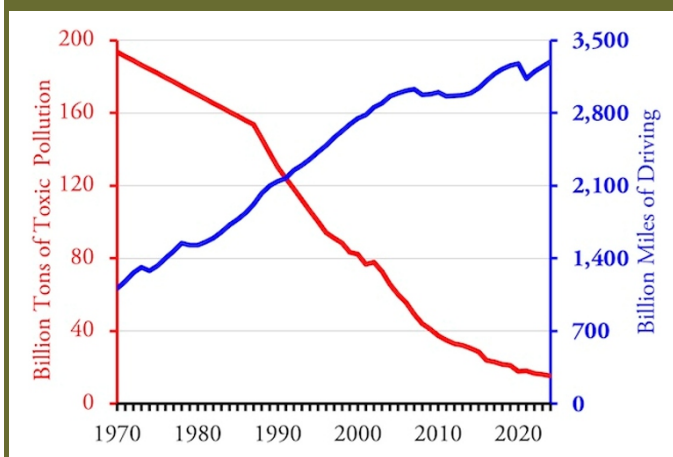
making it difficult to see Mount Hood on a sunny day. Traffic accidents were killing more than 50,000 people per year for a rate of nearly 50 deaths per billion vehicle-miles of driving.

In 1970, Congress passed the Highway Safety Act that created the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Also in 1970, Congress passed the Clean Air Act that created the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to fix the air pollution problems. These agencies set about fixing the problems with highway vehicles.

The EPA took a two-pronged approach to the air pollution problem. First, it passed increasingly stringent emissions standards for automobiles and trucks. Second, it directed cities to write transportation control strategies aimed at reducing pollution in especially dirty areas. The agency encouraged cities to promote transit and other alternatives and take other steps to reduce driving.

This resulted in a five-decade experiment to determine what was the best way to reduce air pollution: improving autos and highways or reducing miles traveled? Today, all these costs have been greatly reduced if not eliminated. The average car in 2019 (the latest year for which data are available) could go 28.0 miles per gallon of gas. Light trucks (pickups, vans, SUVs) have also more than doubled their energy efficiency from under 10 miles per gallon to more than 20. Toxic air pollution from motor vehicles has been reduced by [92 percent](#) as of 2024. Fatality rates have declined by more than 75 percent to just [12 per billion](#) vehicle-miles in 2024.

Figure 4: U.S. Driving and Air Pollution



In the last 54 years, driving tripled but toxic air pollution from motor vehicles dropped by 92 percent and the pollution emitted per mile by the average car dropped by 97 percent.

Source: [Environmental Protection Agency](#),
[Federal Highway Administration](#).

None of these improvements came about due to efforts to reduce driving. In fact, driving tripled between 1970 and 2024. Instead, the reductions in social costs are due solely to better cars and highways. For example, individual cars today produce only about 3 percent as much toxic pollution and less than half the greenhouse gases per mile of driving as they did in 1970.

Efforts to reduce driving were completely unsuccessful. [One study](#) reviewed more than twenty traffic management strategies, including transit improvements, pedestrian and bicycle facilities, dedicated lanes, limits on parking, and lower speed limits. It found that only two could be shown to produce air quality benefits: road pricing to reduce congestion and low-emissions zones, that is, areas where petroleum-powered vehicles were simply excluded.

Worse, some efforts to reduce driving did more harm than good as one of the major tools planners use to discourage driving is to increase traffic congestion. Vehicles consume more fuel and emit more pollution when in congested traffic, so such increases lead to more emissions even if they did reduce driving a little.

Greenhouse gas emissions are directly proportional to fuel consumption. The highest fuel economy of gasoline-powered vehicles is reached at speeds of [45 to 55 miles per hour](#), so any policies that reduce speeds below that are climate unfriendly. Since autos use the most fuel when accelerating, stop-and-go traffic can increase fuel consumption, and therefore emissions, by [10 to 40 percent](#).

greenhouse gas emissions. This conveniently allows them to ignore this problem.

While automobiles have become cleaner, transit has become less environmentally friendly as agencies such as TriMet insist on running transit lines that have low ridership. Even before the pandemic, the average TriMet bus emitted [more greenhouse gases](#) per passenger-mile than the average light truck and far more than the average car. While electric-powered light rail is cleaner, the same effect could be achieved by increasing the number of electric vehicles in the region's auto fleet. Even with electric light rail, TriMet's system as a whole produced [more greenhouse gases](#) per passenger-mile than the average light truck in 2024.

THE FAILURE OF VISION ZERO

Autos are not only much cleaner and more fuel efficient than they were a few decades ago, those numbers are improving every year. This hasn't been true of highway safety, as there has been a worrisome increase in traffic fatalities in the last decade. According to [data](#) published by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, total traffic fatalities in both the city of Portland and the Portland urban area (defined here as urban Clackamas, Multnomah, and Washington counties) reached their lowest number in 2014. Pedestrian fatalities bottomed out in the Portland urban area in 2013 and in the city of Portland in 2015. Since those years, both total and pedestrian fatalities have nearly tripled in the city and double in the urban area.

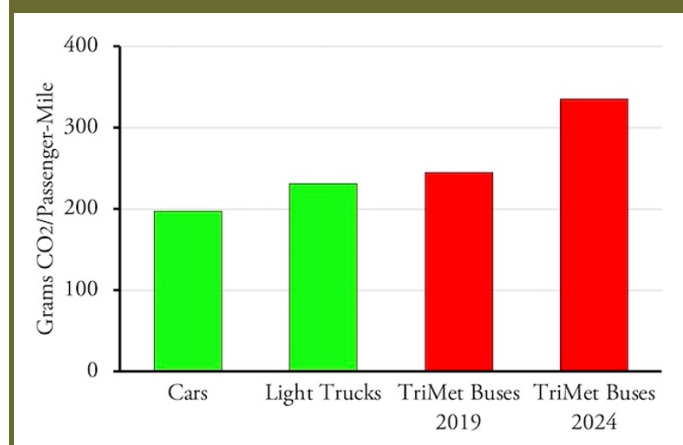
As it happens, in 2015 Portland adopted its [Vision Zero](#) plan, which aims to reduce traffic fatalities to zero. While that is a noble goal, it is meaningless if the policies in the plan don't work. According to the city, the primary focus of the plan is to [slow down driving](#) by reducing speed limits, redesigning streets to discourage faster speeds, and changing traffic signal timing to reduce speeds.

All these steps will increase greenhouse gas emissions, which might be worth it if they saved a few lives. But the data cited above show that the number of annual fatalities has tripled since the plan was adopted. Slowing traffic speeds is apparently the wrong solution to the problem.

Finding the right solution means going beyond sloganeering and instead developing a data-driven process that examines each accident and, rather than assign blame to one party or another, accumulates knowledge about how to prevent such accidents in the future. The U.S. airline industry [developed](#) such a process in about 2000 that really did reduce fatal accidents to near-zero.

The beginnings of a database for Portland-area traffic accidents can be found in the National Highway Traffic

Figure 5: Greenhouse Gas Emissions



TriMet buses emit more greenhouse gases per passenger mile than cars and light trucks. Cars and light trucks based on [2019 data](#); they were probably even more climate friendly in 2024. TriMet data from [National Transit Database](#).

The transportation planning models used by Metro and other transportation planning agencies do not account for the effects of slower speeds or congestion on pollution or

Safety Administration's [Fatality and Injury Reporting System Tool](#) (FIRST). It shows that a majority of fatalities in the city of Portland are pedestrians.

The data further show that the most dangerous roads are non-freeway arterials. Over the past 15 years, Portland-area freeways suffered fewer than 0.5 fatalities per billion vehicle-miles, but principal non-freeway arterials saw 2.4 fatalities per billion. Minor arterials had 1.7 fatalities, collectors were 1.4, and local streets slightly more than 0.5 per billion vehicle-miles. Thus, the greatest efforts should be made to increase safety on principal non-freeway arterials.

The data also show that most pedestrians killed were crossing streets away from intersections at night, and about a third were inebriated at the time. The data don't show the homeless status of these pedestrians, but the city of Portland has noted that as many as [70 percent](#) of its pedestrian fatalities are homeless.

This paints a very different picture of Portland traffic safety than the one presented by Vision Zero. Instead of the problem being speeding traffic during the day, it appears that most pedestrian fatalities are homeless people crossing non-freeway arterials at night away from normal crosswalks, often under the influence of alcohol or other drugs. Rather than slow down all traffic 24 hours a day, traffic safety might best be improved by housing the homeless or at least moving homeless camps away from arterials.

Far fewer fatalities involve bicycle riders, but based on data from the last 15 years, Portland's approach to bicycle safety is also wrong. Portland has installed bike lanes on many streets. These are designed to protect cyclists from being struck from behind by an automobile, but such accidents are rare. Only one out of 31 bicycle fatalities in the past 15 years involved the cyclist being hit by an overtaking automobile.

Instead, about two-thirds of bicycle fatalities take place at intersections. Moreover, this type of accident has dramatically increased in the last few years. Between 2010 and 2014, there were no such fatalities. Between 2020 and 2024, there were nine.

Most bicycle lanes disappear at intersections. The lanes may increase cycling by giving the bicycle riders an illusion of safety, but this can increase fatalities by exposing more bicycle riders to dangerous intersections.

WHAT METRO AND PORTLAND SHOULD DO INSTEAD

Both history and recent research have demonstrated that Metro and the Portland Bureau of Transportation's

strategies for reducing auto driving are incompatible with their goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. In light of this, the agencies' hostility to the automobile has become more of an obsession than a reasoned policy.

The anti-freeway policy is especially troublesome. Except for very short distances, almost no freeway in the Portland area is more than six lanes wide. Boise has eight-lane freeways. Salt Lake City has eight- and even ten-lane freeways. Portland is only limited to six lanes because of state and local anti-auto policies.

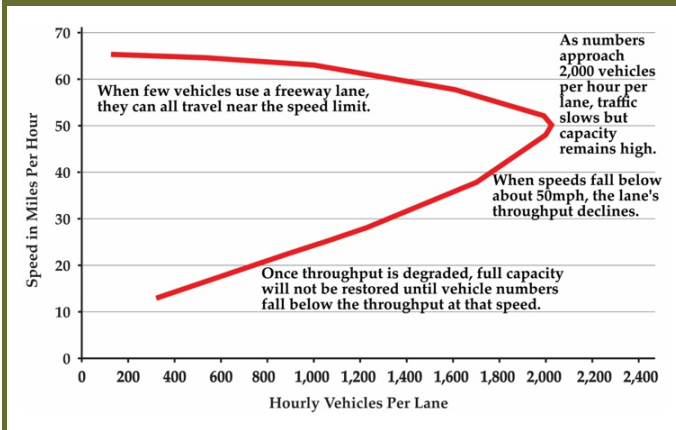
Portland has about [77 miles](#) of freeway and 400 lane-miles of freeway for every million residents. This compares to the national average in the nation's 454 urban areas of 112 freeway miles and 626 lane-miles per million residents. According to the Texas Transportation Institute's [2025 urban mobility report](#), urban areas with much higher numbers of freeway miles per million residents also have much less delay per auto commuter. The St. Louis urban area, for example, has about the same population as the Portland area, yet has more than twice as many freeway miles and almost three times as many lane-miles and its residents suffer only about three-fourths as much congestion delay as Portland's.

Expanding Portland's freeway network would relieve congestion and improved average fuel economy. That in turn would reduce air pollution, especially greenhouse gas emissions. Freeway expansions would also save lives by attracting vehicles away from non-freeway arterials, which are the most dangerous urban streets, and on to freeways, which are the safest urban roads.

The standard argument against freeway expansion is that more road capacity will just lead people to drive more which will lead to congestion being as bad as it was before the expansion. The odd thing about this argument is that effectively says that new infrastructure has failed if people use it, with the obvious corollary being that new infrastructure is only successful if people don't use it.

The real solution to congestion is road pricing. Congestion can significantly reduce highway throughputs. A typical freeway lane, for example, can move more than 2,000 vehicles per hour, but when it gets congested, throughput can fall below 1,000 vehicles per hour. Making sure the lanes never get congested can effectively double throughputs during rush hours, making it possible for more people to get to their jobs and other destinations without delays.

Figure 6: Traffic Flows in Vehicles Per Hour



Pricing roads to ensure that the number of vehicles per hour per lane never exceeds about 2,000 will keep road capacities high and allow more people to get to their destinations without facing congestion during all hours of the day.

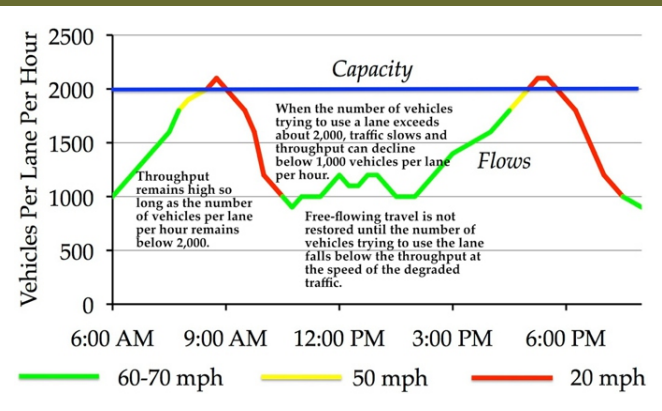
Source: [Washington State Department of Transportation](#).

The state Department of Transportation's recent proposals to price Portland-area freeways ran into a storm of opposition. This was partly because the state did not do a good job of explaining that road pricing could effectively increase highway capacities. But there is also a strong feeling that people have already paid for existing roads through their gas taxes and vehicle registration fees and shouldn't have to pay for them again through road pricing.

The solution to this is to follow the example of the San Francisco Bay Area by building high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes for every freeway in the region. These lanes would be priced so that they never become congested, and the collected tolls would help pay for their construction. They would give people a choice between free lanes and toll lanes and would reduce congestion on the free lanes by attracting vehicles to the toll lanes.

Development of a HOT lane network would improve transit as well. The problem with Portland's transit is that it is focused on downtown. About 28 percent of downtown workers commute by transit, but less than 5 percent of workers in the rest of the Portland area use transit. This downtown focus has been emphasized by the region's light-rail program, as most light-rail lines go downtown. Since only about 10 percent of the region's jobs were in downtown before the pandemic, and even fewer today, this downtown focus means transit provides terrible service to the other 90 percent of the region's residents.

Figure 7: Freeway Capacity and Demand



Highways are the only thing whose supply declines when demand increases. If more than about 2,000 vehicles per hour attempt to use a freeway lane for only a few minutes, the freeway can end up congested for hours. Road pricing keeps demand for those few minutes below the maximum capacity, thus increasing throughput throughout the day.

As I've noted in a previous [Cascade Policy Institute report](#), transit will serve more people if it were redesigned to provide as good service to suburban economic centers as it currently provides downtown. Such a polycentric system would identify eight to ten major economic centers, including downtown, Hillsboro, and the airport, and operate non-stop buses between every economic center and every other center. These buses could use the HOT lane network and thus would never face congestion.

As previously noted, increasing the region's freeway capacity would improve traffic safety by drawing vehicles away from non-freeway arterials, which are the most dangerous roads in the region, onto freeways, which are the safest roads in the region. Freeways are safer because they separate motor vehicles from non-motorized uses and minimize intersections where many traffic accidents take place.

This principle of separating uses can be extended to other roads as well. For example, Portland's bicycle plan includes adding bike lanes to arterial and collector streets such as Broadway and Glisan and at the same time turning local streets such as Tillamook and east Everett into bicycle boulevards, which are streets that allow local auto traffic and through bicycle traffic but no through auto traffic. Bike lanes create an illusion of safety but put bicycles in danger of accidents at intersections while bicycle boulevards effectively separate bicycles from through motor vehicles. Instead of bike lanes, Portland should focus on expanding the bicycle boulevard network.

CONCLUSIONS

Portland's policy of building rail transit lines rather than new highways has failed to increase transit's share of travel and left the region's transit system less resilient in the face of changes such as those resulting from the pandemic. Portland's anti-freeway, anti-auto policies have failed to make a significant dent in the automobile's share of travel or per capita vehicle-miles of driving and, by allowing congestion to grow, have increased the region's greenhouse gas emissions.

Instead of continuing these failed policies, Metro and Portland should adopt policies that have been proven to work. That means building new roads that are safer and less congested and encouraging people to drive automobiles that are more fuel-efficient and emit fewer greenhouse gases per mile. Specifically:

1. Metro and the state should add HOT lanes to every freeway in the region, pricing those lanes to ensure they never become congested and using the revenues to help pay for their construction. If Oregon and Washington build new bridges across the Columbia, they should use congestion pricing as well.
2. Metro and TriMet should stop planning new rail transit lines or dedicated busways and instead redesign the region's bus system to serve major economic centers such as Hillsboro and the airport as well as TriMet currently serves downtown. This system would run non-stop buses between those centers on the HOT lanes, thus avoiding congestion without taking lanes away from other motor vehicles while local buses would radiate away from each of the centers, thus providing coverage to the entire region.
3. Metro and Portland should develop a data-driven safety program that corrects actual traffic safety hazards rather than relies on slogans and generic policies such as reduced speed limits.
4. Portland should encourage safe bicycle riding by emphasizing bicycle boulevards on local streets rather than bike lines in arterial and collector streets.
5. Portland should improve regional equity while minimizing greenhouse gas emissions by dedicating some of its clean-energy funds to a program of low-interest loans to low-income people buying electric vehicles or vehicles that are much more fuel efficient than average.