

August 2026 #26-15

Summary

Portland's decades-long effort to suppress driving has produced more congestion, declining transit use, and worsening safety outcomes. Automobiles remain the region's essential mobility tool, offering economic and social opportunity unmatched by transit. This commentary outlines four data-driven strategies to improve safety, equity, and mobility by embracing—not restricting—automobile travel.

Word Count: 796

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Portland's War on Cars 4: A Smarter Automobile Strategy to End Gridlock

By Randal O'Toole

Portland and Metro are losing their war on the automobile. The war began around 1982, when the region's leaders decided not to build more freeways after the completion of I-205 in the hope that people would drive less if they didn't have more roads to drive on.

Thanks to the no-more-freeways policy, the amount of time the average Portland-area commuter wastes sitting in traffic has [tripled](#) since 1982 and the amount of fuel wasted in congestion has sextupled, generating 250,000 tons of additional greenhouse gases each year.

Despite congestion, driving has more than doubled and per capita driving has grown by 16 percent since 1982. In 2024, the Portland area's share of commuters driving alone to work was the [highest](#) it has ever been.

To give people an alternative to driving, Portland spent billions on light rail, streetcars, and commuter rail. Yet the number of transit trips taken by the average resident has fallen by 16 percent since 1982. In 2024, only [3.8 percent](#) of workers in the Portland urban area commuted by transit, down from [9.6 percent](#) in 1980.

Portland is turning traffic lanes on major streets such as Foster Road and [82nd Avenue](#) into exclusive bus lanes. Lanes that once carried up to 1,000 automobiles per hour will be dedicated to a handful of buses per hour. This is a waste of space.

Portland has also installed bike lanes on many streets, sometimes by reducing the number of automobile lanes, protecting bicycle riders from being hit from behind by automobiles. But most bicycle fatalities take place at intersections, where bike lanes disappear. The annual number of bicycle fatalities in the city of Portland has almost tripled since the early 2010s, mostly due to increased accidents at intersections.

Despite new bike lanes, cycling apparently peaked in [2014](#). Since then, the number of Portland-area workers commuting by bicycle fell by more than [40 percent](#) while the number driving alone to work increased by 5 percent.

There are good reasons why well over 95 percent of passenger travel in the Portland area is by automobile. Autos give people [access](#) to higher-paying jobs, lower-cost consumer goods, better housing, and recreation and social opportunities that are denied to people dependent on slower forms of transportation.

The convenience and economy of automobiles democratized mobility. Before Henry Ford's mass-produced cars, only the wealthy were truly mobile. Black auto ownership enabled the [civil rights movement](#) and the rise of two-car families fueled the [women's rights movement](#). Low-income Portlanders understand this and are just as likely to [get to work by automobile](#) as high-income ones.



Admittedly, automobiles were a problem in the 1970s, when traffic accidents killed up to 55,000 people per year, the average car got only 13 miles per gallon, and motor vehicles spewed so much pollution that Mount Hood was often invisible from Portland on sunny days. Today, automotive air pollution has declined by nearly [90 percent](#), fuel economies have [nearly doubled](#), and [2025](#) highway fatalities were [30 percent](#) lower than 1970.

None of these improvements resulted from efforts to reduce driving. Instead, Americans drive [three times](#) as many miles today as they did in 1970. In fact, attempts by cities to reduce driving by not building more roads made solving these problems even more difficult as cars waste fuel, pollute more, and are involved in [more accidents](#) in congested traffic.

If Portland and Metro truly care about the future of the region, they will end the war on the automobile and adopt policies that increase mobility and allow people to safely, efficiently, and quickly reach their economic, social, and other destinations. Here are four ways to do so:

1. Add [high-occupancy toll lanes](#) to all the region's freeways and manage them so that **they will never get congested**. Uncongested freeway lanes can move twice as many vehicles per hour as congested ones, so keeping the new lanes uncongested will give people more economic opportunities and reduce congestion on the existing lanes as well by attracting vehicles off those lanes.
2. Develop a [data-driven safety program](#) that fixes actual traffic safety hazards rather than relies on slogans and generic policies such as reduced speed limits.
3. Improve regional equity by offering [low-interest loans](#) to help low-income people buy electric or otherwise fuel-efficient automobiles.
4. **Redesign TriMet's route map.** TriMet works for people going to or from downtown Portland but almost completely fails people going anywhere else. TriMet should design a [system](#) that serves other important economic centers as well as it currently serves downtown.

Automobiles are wonderful tools that greatly improve people's lives. If there are problems associated with them, the solution is not to try to discourage driving but to promote automobiles and roads that are cleaner, safer, and more fuel efficient. That should be Portland and Metro's goal.

All numbers cited in this commentary are from or calculated from the U.S. Department of Transportation, Department of Energy, or Census Bureau data. For more information, see O'Toole's full report, [The Portland Transportation Disaster](#).

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Editor's note: This is part 4 in a series "Portland's War on Cars" from a new report by the Cascade Policy Institute, [The Portland Transportation Disaster: The High Cost of Anti Auto Planning in Portland](#). Read the recent commentaries: "[Portland's War on Cars 1: Losing the War on the Automobile](#);" "[Portland's War on Cars 2: Ignoring the Benefits of Automobiles](#);" "[Portland's War on Cars 3: Ending the War on Automobiles](#)."

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