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QuickPoint! ● MAX Turns 40 – O'Toole Examines TriMet's Anniversary Claims

By Randal O'Toole

Portland's light-rail system turned 40 years old last Saturday and naturally TriMet, the region's transit agency, published a celebratory press release about how Portland managed to escape New York's "evil" Robert Moses—who advocated for people to drive cars in the 1950s and 1960s.

Needless to say, the article never mentions that the region's workers who commute by transit fell from 9.6 percent before light-rail construction began to 6.5 percent when the first line was completed and it has never recovered since.

A Portland light-rail train chuckles its way into downtown after having bilked taxpayers for hundreds of millions of dollars only to see transit's share of commuting decline.

Despite this failure, and despite the fact that voters have rejected just about every transit ballot measure since 1998, TriMet has continued to build light-rail lines. Thanks to this determination, the share of Portland commuters who drive alone to work has grown from 64.6 percent in 1980—before the first light-rail line opened—to a record 77.4 percent in 2024. Take that, Robert Moses!

Some of this information is available in a 40th anniversary article written by The Antiplanner that was published by the Cascade Policy Institute. When I wrote that article, I didn't know that TriMet was going to blame Robert Moses for everyone wanting to drive—and then give itself credit for somehow saving Portland

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from that fate.

In reality, Moses wasn't anti-transit; he simply realized the growth of people driving cars and worked to accommodate that growth. To make driving safer, he built parkways that were open to cars but not tall trucks. Robert Caro interpreted this to mean that Moses was a racist because blacks were more likely to ride buses than whites.

Transit advocates have further twisted this to paint Moses as "anti-transit" because buses couldn't travel under the bridges too low for trucks. In fact, New York City already had plenty of underground transit going to most of the same places as the parkways; they didn't need to run buses on those parkways.

Leave it to the anti-auto transit bureaucrats to ignore reality and make light rail an ideological issue. If you are not *for* light rail, then you must be a racist! If you are not *for* light rail, then you must be against people who are too poor to own a car! If you are not *for* light rail, then you must want to destroy the planet with greenhouse gases!

Pay no attention to the fact that light rail hasn't fixed any of these problems and in fact has made most of them worse.

Randal O'Toole is an Adjunct Scholar at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon's free market public policy research organization. He is a transportation and land-use policy analyst and the author of several books, including *American Nightmare: How Government Undermines the Dream of Homeownership* and *Romance of the Rails: Why the Passenger Trains We Love Are Not the Transportation We Need*. He writes from Central Oregon.

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