Cascade Policy Institute OREGON

Cascade Commentary

September 2026 #26-16-b

Summary: TriMet's 40-year light-rail legacy reflects a costly shift that weakened Portland's transit system. Light rail reduced bus service, depressed ridership, and failed to adapt as jobs decentralized. Despite billions invested, transit commuting has collapsed. Portland now faces the challenge of redesigning a system that serves the entire region—not just downtown.

Word Count: 1,185

"Light rail is an expensive, obsolete form of transportation that no longer fits today's decentralized urban areas."

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MAX Turns 40: How Light Rail Emptied Portland's Transit System

By Randal O'Toole

TriMet's first light-rail line, which celebrates its 40th birthday on September 5th, put Portland on the map as a transportation innovator, leading the *New York Times* to call Portland "the city that loves transit." Just the idea of building light rail convinced President Carter to ask then-Mayor Neil Goldschmidt to be the U.S. Secretary of Transportation.

Yet light rail is a fraud. Hardly innovative--articulated streetcars that can be coupled together date back to 1939--light rail is an expensive, obsolete form of transportation that no longer fits today's decentralized urban areas. Getting locked into this technology propelled TriMet and Portland down a path that severely damaged the region's transit and transportation systems.

When Goldschmidt first proposed light rail, his real goal was to cancel the Mount Hood Freeway without losing the federal funds that would have paid for most of that highway. Fortunately for him, but unfortunately for Portland transit riders, in 1973 Congress passed a law allowing cities to cancel freeways and spend those funds on transit improvements.

Portland's transit system then consisted solely of buses. To use the federal funds and create union construction jobs and construction company profits, and the campaign contributions that went with them, Goldschmidt proposed light rail.

He didn't choose light rail because it was flexible or efficient. Instead, he picked it *because it was expensive* and would consume those federal dollars.

Buses do everything better than light rail except spend money. Compared with buses, light rail is high-cost, low-capacity transit because a bus route can move more people per hour than light rail.

Rail advocates often claim that a single rail line can move more people than a multi-lane freeway, but that is simply not true. To calculate this, they typically assume trains are full while cars each have only one occupant. The results are very different if we assume instead that both trains and autos are filled to capacity.

A light-rail station can serve only 20 trains an hour. Portland's short blocks limit light-rail trains to just two cars. When jammed with riders, a two-car light-rail train can hold 334 people, so a light-rail line can move 6,680 people an hour in each direction.

A freeway lane can move 2,000 cars an hour. The average car can hold five people for 10,000 people an hour. If 300 of those cars are replaced with one hundred 60-passenger buses, the lane can move 14,500 people an hour. That's just one lane, and Portland's two-track light-rail line was supposed to cost as much as a four-lane freeway.

It ended up costing much more than a four-lane freeway. To pay for its share of the cost overruns, TriMet increased fares and cut bus service. Thus, the opening of the first light-rail line was a cause of mourning for lost transit riders.

Before light rail, TriMet bus ridership peaked in 1985 at almost 55 million trips per year, then fell because of the fare increases and service cutbacks. In 1987, buses and trains together carried 7 percent fewer trips than buses alone in 1985.

Ridership wasn't helped when the opening of light rail led TriMet to cancel express buses that went from Hollywood, Gateway, and other places to downtown. Many of those bus riders decided to drive rather than ride the slower and less comfortable light rail.

Before it started building light rail, TriMet improvements to bus service had generated some of the fastest growth of any transit system in the nation. Bus ridership more than doubled between 1970 and 1980. Transit grew faster than driving as the share of Portland urban area workers commuting by transit rose from 6.9 percent in 1970 to 9.6 percent in 1980.

Light rail reduced that to just 6.5 percent in 1990. Although the region's total number of workers grew by 21 percent, the number of transit commuters fell by 18 percent.

TriMet built more light-rail lines, yet transit never again came close to carrying 9.6 percent of Portland-area commuters to work. The highest it reached was 7.9 percent in 2015.

That was the year TriMet's most-expensive light-rail line to date opened, the $1.5 billion Orange line. Despite all the hoopla over Tilikum Crossing, this line produced more depressing results as bus-plus-light-rail ridership dropped 5 percent between 2015 and 2019.

The 2020 pandemic exposed another serious flaw in TriMet's light-rail dreams. Because most TriMet light-rail and bus routes went downtown, the transit system worked for people going to or from downtown but not for people going to other places. Before the pandemic, 29 percent of downtown workers but less than 5 percent of non-downtown workers commuted by transit.

That would have been fine in 1910, when most jobs were downtown. But jobs have been moving to the suburbs for more than a century so that, by the 2010s, only around 10 percent of Portland-area jobs were downtown.

The pandemic accelerated downtown's decline, as office workers were among the most likely to be able to work at home. Light rail carried only 55 percent as many riders in May 2026 as it had in May 2019. The 2024 share of Portland urban area workers commuting by transit was down to just 3.8 percent. The 60 percent drop in transit's share of workers since 1980 can largely be attributed to the high costs and inflexibility of light rail.

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In response to such profound changes in travel habits, bus routes, which can move more people per hour than light rail without dedicated infrastructure, can be changed overnight. In contrast, light rail requires so many years of planning and construction that, by the time a new line is completed, the need for it may no longer exist.

Rather than design its transit system to serve the modern metropolis, TriMet wants to remake Portland into a nineteenth-century city by supporting high-density housing projects along light-rail lines. These four- to six-story housing projects were inspired by New York City tenements built in the 1880s for workers who were too poor to ride streetcars and had to live within walking distance of downtown jobs.

Some might like living in stack-and-pack housing, but most people who come to Oregon want to enjoy our wide, open spaces and prefer single-family homes over cramped apartments. To support the region's transit system, however, Metro and state land-use rules have severely restricted the construction of new single-family homes.

Even though demand pushes up the cost of single-family housing, people don't want to live in high-density projects, so TriMet has had to subsidize such housing using federal transit dollars. Metro, Portland, and Oregon have used other federal and local funds to subsidize such projects as well. This makes TriMet just as complicit in Portland's housing crisis as Metro and the state.

Efforts to change Portlander's housing preferences have failed just as badly as efforts to get people to ride an obsolete transit system that successfully serves only one of the Portland area's many job centers. Rather than celebrate the 40th anniversary of this transportation disaster, TriMet and Mero should use it to reflect on how they can redesign the region's transportation system so that it serves all Portland-area residents and not just those who work or live in downtown.

Editor's note: This is the final commentary in a summer-long 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.

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