



Date: Wednesday, December 9, 2020

To: Oregon Transportation Commission
Oregon Legislature - Joint Committee on Transportation

CC: Governor Kate Brown

From: Aaron Brown, No More Freeways

Subject: **Prioritize Public Transit, Street Safety, Climate Action, Racial Justice in STIP funding - Support S2 investment (and Not More Freeways)**

2020 has been a helluva year. Our state has undergone an unprecedented reckoning with institutional white supremacy. We've suffered climate-change induced wildfires that destroyed communities, killed nine and drenched the Pacific Northwest in suffocating smoke for weeks. And we continue to weather a deadly pandemic with economic repercussions that have devastated our state's budget and left millions on the edge of financial precarity.

It is therefore surprising to us that the Oregon Department of Transportation's proposals of how to invest over \$2,200,000,000 in funding for crucial infrastructure through the State Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) is an egregious continuation of a status quo paradigm of investment in our state that takes into consideration none of the challenges faced by Oregonians across the state this year. It is even more egregious that the Oregon Transportation Commission seems eager to acquiesce to this continuation of a status quo, rubber stamping this proposal to allocate an anemic 5% of this funding to investments in street safety and public transportation. This abdication of leadership will have devastating impacts for Oregonians across the state in decades to come, from the economic limitations that underinvestment in equitable mobility, the worsening climate-change fueled storms and fires we will be forced to endure, and from the lack of investment in safer streets to make it easier for the hundreds of thousands of Oregonians who are unable to drive an automobile.

No More Freeways is therefore writing in to strongly encourage the Oregon Transportation Commission to approve the original "S2" option that would provide \$321 million of STIP funding for investments that might address the challenges our state is actually facing. While \$321 million will not address the entirety of the state's need for safer, greener streets - and we certainly need to be realigning more than 14%



of our transportation funding towards green infrastructure, the amount \$321 million represents - it feels like an amount that at least acknowledges ODOT recognizes the enormity of the reforms of our transportation system that will be necessary to make a good faith attempt to tackle the overlapping climate crisis, the epidemic of traffic violence, and the decades of systemic racism that propped up a broken, polluting transportation system.

Instead, in quintessential fashion, ODOT staffers scuttled the original proposed investment scenarios that had received hundreds of comments from the public, and proposed new options with even less funding for climate- and safety- investments, the day before the OTC meeting. We defer to our peers including the Oregon Environmental Council, BikeLoudPDX, and others who in their testimony have detailed at length the inadequacy and dubious legality of this particular public comment period jujitsu. We'll instead just point out that this is par for the course for the Oregon Transportation Commission and the Oregon Department of Transportation, which appears downright allergic to committing to the public scrutiny and transparency necessary for the agency to be held accountable for their actions.

Despite the existential threat of climate change looming ever larger, ODOT seems functionally incapable of rising to the challenge and investing in a 21st century, low carbon transportation system - and the OTC seems unwilling to hold the agency accountable. The "S2" option proposed in November would have directed \$321 million - less than 15% - of the STIP funding towards infrastructure that might help Oregonians get around the state.

40% of the state's carbon emissions come from transportation. Future generations of Oregonians, watching rising oceans, droughts, wildfires, and freak storms destroy their community and economy and will laugh at the anemic offering to tackle climate that this ODOT proposal represents. We will fully deserve the unprecedented scorn and vitriol from those born into these times and stand to inherit a diminished community because of the lack of bravery and courage of dozens of elected and appointed officials who collectively didn't rise to the challenge. The children and grandchildren of the OTC members will have to grapple with the fact that when given the opportunity to dramatically push to lower the carbon footprint of Oregon's transportation system, their elders instead acquiesced to the status quo and supported a lukewarm incrementalist option.



Similarly, the epidemic of traffic violence has somehow continued unfettered throughout this year. Despite the pandemic upending traffic patterns and changing commutes across the state, hundreds of Oregonians have died while walking, biking, and driving, like any other year. In the Portland Metro region, a person riding a bicycle was hit and killed *this week* on an ODOT-owned arterial in Northeast Portland. These senseless fatalities are a product of decades of outdated public policy and infrastructure paradigms - this STIP process suggests that ODOT is fundamentally indifferent towards changing these paradigms, guaranteeing that Oregonians across the state will continue to lose loved ones to traffic violence in the decades ahead. This is not inevitable - the OTC could find the courage to direct the agency divest from freeways and highways and put STIP funding into fixing the dangerous streets and arterials we know are statistically likely to cause harm - but it seems that OTC is unwilling to hold this agency accountable. In the Portland Metro region, the failure of Measure 26-218 exacerbates the need for greater funding for retrofitting ODOT's orphaned highways, which routinely maim and kill people biking, walking and driving on these dangerous, dangerous streets. It is appalling that the OTC doesn't recognize their complicity in perpetuating this needless death and suffering.

It should go without saying that it's the most marginalized and vulnerable of our state - including low-income, BIPOC, disabled, young, elderly - Oregonians who suffer the most from our outdated paradigm of investing the bulk of our transportation funding in motordom. ODOT staffers have also been quick to label the opposition to these outdated proposals as exclusively based in Multnomah County. Make no mistake - Oregonians need safer streets and transit options in every community in the state, and it does a disservice to any good faith conversation to pretend that investing in safer routes to school or bus service to senior centers is somehow uniquely a need of those of us living in urban communities. ODOT's outreach to these communities is abysmal (the agency was sued by Disability Rights Oregon in 2018 for its lack of commitment to ADA investments) and any claim by the agency that they've conducted meaningful public outreach to justify their backwards funding proposals need to be met with deep skepticism and scrutiny. Oregonians are clamoring for safer streets, transit investments and climate action - if only ODOT wanted to listen.

In closing, we wish to express our grave disappointment that this agency continues to demonstrate a flagrant disinterest in transparency or accountability to the



public. This is the first Oregon Transportation Commission meeting that the public is allowed to testify at since the hearing in February; if the OTC can find the time to continue to advance proposals for billions of dollars in freeway and highway expansions around the state during a pandemic, hopefully the Commission acknowledges it should also be able to figure out how to accept remote public testimony.

Anything short of the already paltry “Option 2” \$321 million for non-highway funding - and anything over the billions that the agency plans to dump into road and highway projects - is an abdication of leadership and responsibility from the Oregon Transportation Commission. Ostensibly sworn in as public servants to steward the public interest, it seems downright impossible to look at the overlapping tragedies attacking our state - especially those most vulnerable to racist, classist, ageist systemic discrimination - and assess that the Commission is meaningfully committed to being part of the solution. We urge the Oregon Transportation Commission to hold the Oregon Department of Transportation accountable to fixing our polluting, racist, climate-destroying transportation system - and we urge Governor Brown to recognize their continued failure of leadership as she considers OTC appointments and potential reforms of both the OTC and ODOT in the future.

Nothing short of the health and well-being of our state depends on it.