

TO: Portland Planning and Sustainability Commission  
FROM: Doug Allen  
SUBJECT: Transportation System Plan Proposed Draft -- TESTIMONY  
DATE: September 26, 2017

We have a transit crisis in this town, and the Transportation System Plan update does not adequately address it. Total TriMet boarding rides are now fewer than they were in 2009. Bus ridership has been flat since 2000. As population grows in Portland, and density increases, this simply can't go on.

Transit ridership will only increase if we deal with the situation as a system, not as individual routes, and spend our limited resources cost-effectively.

The City of Portland provides the street infrastructure on which the major part of TriMet service operates, and it must manage that infrastructure in ways that facilitate improved service. It must not place roadblocks in the path of better service.

Most importantly, the TSP must recognize, and state up front, that in order to achieve adequate transit ridership, the City and TriMet must provide a transit grid that adequately serves the variety of trips that people want to make, when they want to make those trips, and with acceptable door-to-door travel time. For most of Portland east of the Willamette River, this means a grid of frequent bus service connecting with rail trunk lines. This grid must facilitate movement both North-South and East-West, with continuous linear bus routes and convenient spacing wherever feasible.

Unfortunately, we have a two-tiered system, with the so-called "frequent service" bus routes providing better service to the closer-in, more affluent part of town, while further out the service is inadequate, and the income levels are often lower. Of course there are reasons of history and housing density behind this, but the disparity remains, and needs to be addressed.

The City of Portland unfortunately helps to perpetuate this disparity in service level by having the two separate categories of Major Transit Priority Streets, and Transit Access Streets. An effective multi-destinational transit system cannot support people's trip needs with significant portions of the grid relegated to second-rate service.

A good example of this is the policy to "Carefully consider any street design changes to Major Transit Priority Streets that impact travel time in light of the potential costs and benefits to transit riders, while also taking into account other adopted goals and policies."

Why does this policy not also apply to Transit Access Streets?

Clearly, travel time is just as important for bus passengers on NE Fremont, NE 24th, NE 33rd, SE 52nd Ave., NE & SE 60th Ave., NE Glisan, SE Holgate, SE Woodstock, SE Steele, etc. as it is for passengers on, say, SE Belmont.

Among the other disparities are policies regarding slowing traffic, such as speed bumps, and bus stop spacing. Bus stop spacing is the one area where the Transit Access streets come out better.

In the Discussion Draft, the recommended stop spacing is every 1/4 mile for Major Transit Priority Streets, and every 1/8 to 1/4 mile for Transit Access Streets. However, in the Proposed Draft, the recommended spacing is 1/4 to 1/2 mile for Major Transit Priority Streets, and every 1/4 mile for Transit Access Streets. This change is unfortunate, and reflects ignorance of the needs of transit riders.

Transit experts have recommended bus stop spacing of approximately 1/4 mile, yet ignorant local planners seem to think that if 1/4 mile is good, then 1/2 mile is better. This is a kick in the shins to people who have difficulty walking longer distances, and is bad policy. TriMet is designing the Division Transit Project to have bus stops spaced as far as 1/2 mile apart, for dubious reasons related to budget and supposed time savings. I suspect that this misguided project is now influencing what TriMet is recommending to the City of Portland. TriMet has no evidence for believing that spacing bus stops further than 1/4 mile apart will have a net positive effect on ridership.

A proven way to obtain bus travel time savings, while increasing bus ridership, is to overlay frequent local service with limited and express services, which are initially provided just during peak times. Vancouver, BC has done this with their 99-B route that has grown to carry close to 60,000 boarding riders per day.

If you want transit to carry more people and help fight climate change, you must seriously consider eliminating the distinction between Major Transit Priority Streets and Transit Access Streets, and not degrade access to bus stops on Major Transit Priority Streets.

Related to this is the Enhanced Transit Corridors program, which I am not clear how it fits into the TSP. Although the intent is good, it would be better to have an Enhanced Transit Grid program, that looks at the transit system in a more holistic fashion, and considers the potential for needed new service. As an example, TriMet is planning to extend Line 24 Fremont bus service across the Fremont Bridge to Northwest Portland and south to Goose Hollow. Specific priority improvements at the east side connection between the Fremont Bridge and Fremont St. could vastly improve the effectiveness of this new cross-river connection. This should be considered on the basis of how this link fits into the transit grid, rather than as part of some "corridor" study of Fremont St., although Fremont used to have much higher ridership before TriMet cut service, and it should be upgraded to "frequent service" at the same time the new connection is implemented.

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