

July 14, 2021

Oregon Transportation Commission
355 Capitol Street, NE MS 11
Salem, Oregon 97301

Dear Chair Van Brocklin and members of the Oregon Transportation Commission:

Our organizations write this letter as communities around the state are reporting dozens of deaths in the wake of a record-breaking heat wave while preparing for another summer and fall of destructive wildfires. Climate change is already bringing enormous human suffering to Oregon. Transportation systems have been disrupted. The consensus among experts is that the chaos and destruction of global warming will bring far worse.

Transportation-related emissions make up nearly 40% of Oregon's total greenhouse gas emissions, and continue to steadily increase. The investments that ODOT has made to address climate, while valuable, are profoundly insufficient given the scale and urgency with which we must reduce emissions to avert the worst of the grim and chaotic future we are already experiencing.

It is time — it is past time — for ODOT to be responsible stewards for Oregon's communities and act with the urgency necessary to meet the needs of Oregon communities. **Oregon's transportation system must evolve beyond a system designed around the efficiency of single vehicle trips to a system that emphasizes the efficient, decarbonized movement of people and goods.** We must redesign our transportation system to make transit, biking, and walking the easiest and most accessible forms of transportation, and invest in electrifying the driving that people still have to do.

The benefits of this shift are not solely environmental. Getting personal vehicles off the road frees up space for freight and other essential vehicle travel. Reducing the number of passenger vehicles on the road is not only the most effective and cheapest congestion relief tool, but also reduces the maintenance costs of roadways and decreases the amount of impervious surface devoted to storing and moving vehicles, which contribute to heat islands. Climate action does not require economic sacrifice; we are holding ourselves back by insisting on perpetuating an expensive and inefficient paradigm created in the middle of the last century.

We have reviewed the [draft "Climate Action Plan."](#) The actions listed in this document are a good start. However, it does not reflect the urgency or the size of the need to act. It is not enough to "seek additional funding" and "explore mechanisms." ODOT has to stop spending money on making it easier to drive more, and spend that money instead on making it easier to take transit, bike, or walk. Climate and equitable outcomes must be immediately prioritized — not just incorporated — in all ODOT decision-making, including all new investments and the development of new pricing tools.

While this shift would take years to fully implement, there are many immediate actions ODOT could take. For example:

- Implement the Oregon Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan by 2035.
- Tie the provision of transportation funding for local governments to their achievement of land use and transportation policy benchmarks that reduce climate pollution, per ODOT's Statewide Transportation Strategy.

- Prioritize investment in ODOT facilities in communities across the state (“orphan highways”) to improve safety for humans and make it easier to travel by biking and walking.
- Immediately pause adding new capacity for single occupancy vehicles, including “auxiliary lanes,” and establish a policy of instituting equitable congestion pricing for demand management before adding capacity in order to ensure efficient right-sizing of the system.
- Review all current and future projects for impacts on Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) and greenhouse gas emissions, and prioritize projects, plans and investments that reduce VMT and emissions the most.
- Incorporate effective land use planning into transportation planning decisions and transportation investments so that walking, biking, and public transit are prioritized over other modes of transportation.
- Align all funding tools and investments with the state’s climate and equity goals.
- Invest in infrastructure on ODOT facilities that gets buses out of congestion, and makes it safer and more comfortable to get to, wait for, and ride on transit.
- Provide financial, technical and coordination support for transit agencies across the state to plan for the substantial increases in coverage, service and electrification that will be required in order to meet the state’s climate goals.
- Plan and implement improvements and expansion to build a robust network of safe, convenient, reliable, frequent and affordable rail and/or bus connections between communities across the state.
- Connect and build relationships with community based organizations especially in underrepresented communities to co-create programs, plans and improvements that are in line with community needs.

ODOT is taking small actions toward climate change mitigation. We appreciate that effort, and the work of the Climate Office. However, the agency as a whole continues to pour resources into a 20th century belief that the mobility of vehicles and the construction of roads are the highest goals. It is time to let that go, and to embrace a leadership role in shaping a different future.

At the federal level, Oregon is already leading on transforming transportation policies and programs to incorporate climate change through Rep. DeFazio’s INVEST in America Act. At the state level, however, Oregon must continue to lead the nation and the world by going above and beyond federal direction on climate and equity. In doing so, we will reap the benefits in improved air quality, fewer injuries and deaths, faster and more reliable freight trips, more access for more people, thriving communities, and a vibrant economy.

Please direct ODOT to prioritize climate change mitigation and equitable transportation outcomes, starting immediately. Do not hesitate to call on our organizations and communities to support you in this work

Sincerely,

Sara Wright



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Southern Oregon Climate Action Now

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Confronting Climate Change

<https://socan.eco>

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