

Historical Analysis: Portland's Transportation System Plan

Like many of America's cities, Portland is built on a strategic joint between two geographic features. As Manhattan binds the Hudson to the Atlantic, Portland joins the rich soil of the Willamette Valley to the Columbia River and the Pacific Ocean beyond. While New York built the Erie Canal to remain the dominant port on the Eastern seaboard, Portland's rise to power started with a 6-mile-long wooden highway over the Tualatin Mountains. Begun just months after the Portland was incorporated in 1851, the Great Plank Road helped the fledgling town beat out its neighbors to become the prime port in the region. Beyond securing Portland's economic status, the highway also initiated a relationship that influences Portland's transportation plans to this day. For the first 120 years after 1851, Portland's transportation systems focused on extracting wealth from the Willamette Valley through buildable land as well export goods. For the last 50 years that relationship has reversed, with Portland's transportation planning efforts reflecting popular ideas of "sustainability" and "carrying capacity."

Although tensions between activists, politicians, and capitalists had been building nationwide for over a decade, the bill that brought about that switch in thinking in Portland was 1969's Oregon Senate Bill 10. At the time, independent farmers ran the Valley's farming industry and, seeing the value of their property skyrocket as new highways made commuting to Portland easier, retiring farmers were often eager to sell to developers. This set off rapid suburbanization in agricultural and forestry zones that are vital to the state's economy. This "Californication" of Oregon's natural beauty was offensive to at least one leading politician. When Governor Tom McCall introduced SB 10, he described the process taking place in the Valley as "a scatteration of unimaginable mislocated urban development introducing little cancerous cells of unmentionable ugliness into our rural landscape whose cumulative effect threaten to turn this state of scenic excitement into a land of aesthetic boredom." With the combined efforts of conservationists, farm advocates like Hector Macpherson, and Governor McCall, Oregon passed SB 100 in 1973, institutionalizing regional planning and paving the way for statewide planning goals. These goals rejected urban sprawl and eventually led to TSPs that attempted to curtail auto dependence.

In the years following the passage of SB 10, Oregon's new direction received some help from the federal government and a nationwide shift in transportation planning ideals. While the 1962 Federal Highway Act created "powerful litigation opportunities" for stakeholders attempting to stem the tide of urban highways, the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1970 "directed states to confer specifically with 'responsible public officials' who should determine which investments 'best serve the goals and objectives of (urban) communities.'"¹ For the first time in decades,

¹ Gian-Claudia Sciara, "Metropolitan Transportation Planning: Lessons from the Past, Institutions for the Future." *JAPA*, 83, 3, 2017.

power began to shift away from state highway engineers, whose primary goals were “efficient, high-speed road networks rather than local residential networks.”²

In urban centers, Metropolitan Transportation Organizations (MPOs) began to take the place of the engineers. At the same time, the passage of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in 1970 created incentives to invest in more environmentally friendly transportation policies. Both of these factors were a boon to public transit, which had languished in the Interstate Era as “housing and highway policies were controlled by self-interested ‘corporate and professional elites’ who opposed public housing and mass transit, favoring instead the private housing market and the private automobile.”³ By the 1990s, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Service Act (ISTEA) encouraged collaborative multi-modal planning and gave MPOs their first federal funds on the condition that they combat air pollution and congestion. ISTEA also required MPOs to show how their projects would obtain the rest of the necessary funding, leading to more achievable projects. Perhaps not coincidentally, as TSPs turned away from the automobile, culture in urban America also began to turn away from suburbia’s “mallopolis” to embrace environments defined by “heritage of diversity, public space, historic structures, and regional identity.”⁴

All of these forces combined to create Portland’s Transportation System Plan. Developed in 2002 and updated several times between then and 2018, this TSP aims to provide “transportation options for residents, employees, visitors, and firms doing business in Portland, making it more convenient to walk, bike, take transit—and drive less—while meeting their daily needs.” This mission draws influence from several Statewide Planning Goals, but is most closely related to the transportation goal, which aims to provide “a safe, convenient, and economic transportation system.” As auto use is so linked to traffic deaths that the traffic death rate goes up as gas prices go down, this TSP addresses the first point of the goal by encouraging less driving. While it is hard to pin down an objective idea of convenience, some researchers⁵ estimate that auto congestion costs Portland drivers \$1,648 per year, and the City of Portland \$3.9 billion a year. So not only is reducing auto use good for the safety of Portlanders, but also for their wallets. That this TSP addresses multiple statewide planning goals- including the “urbanization” and “agricultural lands” goals by encouraging higher density- is reflective of how embedded the goals from the 1970s are in Portland’s planning institutions and culture.

It would have been almost impossible for the builders of the Great Plank Road to imagine the day when Portland’s economy and the safety of its citizens relied in part on protecting the Willamette Valley from development. It is likely that the entrepreneurial capitalists like Captain Couch would have seen such a decision as hamstringing Portland’s future. However, this TSP is not about suppressing the

² Southworth and Eran Ben-Joseph, “Street Standards and the Shaping of Suburbia.” *JAPA* 61, 1, 1995.

³ Raymond Mohl, “Ike and the Interstates: Creeping toward Comprehensive Planning.” *IPH*, 2, 3, 2003.

⁴ Robert Fishman, “The American Planning Tradition: An Introduction and Interpretation.” In *The American Planning Tradition: Culture and Policy*, The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2000.

⁵ INRIX, “Global Traffic Scorecard” (2017): inrx.com/scorecard/

city's potential, but about creating a transportation system that manages growth in a way that increases prosperity and livability for both Portlanders and their neighbors.

Henry Miller

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