

Joseph Cortright
Testimony on HB 2017
June 7, 2017
(jcortright@gmail.com, 503.515.4524)

A key provision of HB 2017 calls for construction of three freeway widening projects in metro Portland, adding lanes to I-5 at the Rose Quarter, to I-205 in Clackamas County and to Highway 217 near Beaverton.

These freeway widening projects will cost at least a billion dollars, won't reduce traffic congestion, and will increase greenhouse gas emissions. These provisions should be stricken from the bill.

1. Undermines our climate change goals

If we really care about climate change, we shouldn't spend a billion dollars widening freeways.

The big story of the past week has been the outrage over President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Paris Climate Accords. [Governor Brown and Mayor Wheeler](#) have both pledged their commit to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. There's nothing consistent about spending a billion dollars—and likely much more—on freeways and trying to reduce carbon emissions.

According to the 2017 report of the state's Global Warming Commission to the Legislature, Oregon is [failing to meet our legally adopted goal of reducing greenhouse gases by just 10 percent](#) from 1990 levels by 2020—principally because of the increase in driving in the past two years. This proposal takes us in the wrong direction.

We should insist that there be an independent verification of effect on greenhouse gases. It's clear that we can't trust the Oregon Department of Transportation to honestly calculate greenhouse gas emissions. The last transportation bill in 2015 failed after [ODOT admitted that provided the Legislature wildly wrong estimates](#) of carbon pollution from highway projects.

2. Won't reduce congestion.

HB 2017 wastes money on freeway widening projects that won't reduce congestion.

You can't reduce congestion or emissions by building more highways. Houston widened its Katy Freeway multiple times. It's now 23-lanes wide. And less than three years after the widening project, [travel times are now 30 percent](#) longer than they were before they built the project. More highway capacity prompts more driving and more greenhouse gas emissions—this phenomenon of induced demand is now so well documented that it's called "[The Fundamental Law of Road Congestion.](#)"

No technical analysis has been done to show that any of these projects will have a measureable effect on traffic congestion or travel times. There's no evidence that removing these bottlenecks will make anything better.

We should insist that there be an independent verification of the effects of this on traffic.

3. HB 2017 is financially irresponsible.

While the cost is estimated at \$1 billion, the real cost will be much higher.

ODOT has shown that it is totally incapable of delivering projects for their projected costs. Its largest current project, a five-mile improvement to Highway 20 between Newport and Corvallis [ballooned from \\$110 million to almost \\$400 million](#). It had cost overruns of 200-300% on the [Grand Avenue viaduct](#) in Portland, the I-5 interchange in [Woodburn](#) and the I-5 interchange in [Medford](#).

HB 2017 sets the stage for cost overruns: HB 2017 underfunds freeway widening projects by \$250 million and requires they be built. ODOT Director Matt Garrett has already testified that the money allocated in HB 2017 [falls 25% short of his agency's estimate of construction costs](#). This bill virtually guarantees that there will be cost overruns.

As has happened before, we're likely to experience a kind of "bait and switch" on maintenance. Ostensibly, we're told that ODOT has a huge maintenance backlog—which this bill only partly fixes. Instead this bill prioritizes starting this big construction projects, gives them to an agency with a track record of major cost-overruns, and then underfunds the projects. What ODOT will do—as it has done in the past—is cannibalize its repair budget to pay for these big ticket construction projects. It will then likely return in a few years, saying it doesn't have enough money for maintenance.

And fixing roads, not widening them, is what Portland area residents want. A recent poll conducted for KATU by USA research found Portlanders favored repair over road widening by a margin of [47% to 21%](#).

ODOT greatly worsens our maintenance budget problems by deferring maintenance to pay for expensive new construction projects. This is exactly what ODOT did in advocating for the proposed Columbia River Crossing. In 2013, the agency told the Legislature [that it had sufficient funds to pay its share](#) of the \$3 billion CRC without any increase in its tax revenues.

HB 2017 does virtually nothing to fix ODOT's management problems. No acknowledgement and no substantive response to ODOT's mismanagement of expensive projects. ODOT's largest recent project, the 5-mile improvement of highway 20 between Newport and Corvallis ended up costing more than 3 times its original budget, and took five years longer. The bill doesn't identify why this problem occurred and what will be done to make sure it isn't repeated. The freeway widening projects haven't yet been accurately budgeted and could end up costing much more than is identified here.

The so-called audit that was done of ODOT [failed to identify these problems, much less a solution](#). HB 2017 basically requires ODOT to put project information on a website. The recommendation of the \$1 million McKinsey & Company audit was that ODOT [hire consultants](#) to help improve its management practices.

Proposed Amendments to HB 2017

1. Delete funding for freeway expansion

Take the billion dollars earmarked for freeways and use it to fix roads, and improve safety, particularly safe routes to schools.

2. Mandate “Fix-it First”

Require that ODOT get all its roads up to a state of good repair before spending money on new capacity.

3. Repeal the state’s greenhouse gas reduction goals.

If we are going to expand freeways, we should be honest enough to acknowledge that we’re not serious about reducing greenhouse gases.

Makes a mockery of our “Vision Zero” commitment. The three freeway widening projects are associated with exactly none of the Portland region’s most dangerous roadways. Speeding on arterials, not congestion on freeways, is the cause of the most deaths and serious injuries according to Metro’s state of safety report. The decision to dedicate \$1 billion to freeways (which are extremely safe) and spend only a fraction of that on safe routes to schools, and other safety projects says what our real priorities are.

Subsidizes more car commuting and pollution when Oregon’s economy is increasingly moving to other forms of transportation

Penalizes energy-efficient and less polluting vehicles and bicycles.

Higher registration fees would be imposed on high efficiency vehicles—meanwhile heavier, gas guzzling and polluting vehicles would pay lower fees, even though heavier vehicles cause more road damage.

Vague promises to implement road pricing have been sabotaged by an agency that doesn’t want to reduce traffic.

The 2009 Legislature adopted a mandate to test road pricing—which was undermined and evaded by ODOT. Likewise the agency’s OREGO road user fee has attracted

The old “bait and switch” on maintenance: While they say we have billions in unmet maintenance needs—fixing potholes, and shoring up bridges—this plan spends more than a billion dollars on widening freeways.

<https://bikeportland.org/2017/02/01/guest-opinion-odot-management-audit-misleads-omits-key-facts-215843>

http://www.oregonlive.com/politics/index.ssf/2017/05/3_things_that_could_derail_ore.html#incart_most-readpolitics

<http://cityobservatory.org/happy-earth-day-oregon-lets-widen-some-freeways/>
Why Oregon shouldn't squander a billion dollars on freeway widening projects that won't solve congestion, will undermine our climate change goals, and do nothing to solve our real transportation problems.