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## *Make Way for the **Orange Line** and a Milwaukian Renaissance*

by Ben Maras

**M**ilwaukie is undergoing major changes: a new light rail line, a new 8.5-acre waterfront park, a new two-mile neighborhood greenway, two new bike trails, and increasing public and private investment in its downtown. Now, the former riverboat town and more recently, sleepy suburb of 20,000-odd people — only six miles from downtown Portland but qualitatively much far-

ther — appears poised to make a major entrance into metro-area society.

“I believe the opening of the Orange Line will be the beginning of a renaissance for Milwaukie’s downtown,” Wilda Parks, who served as Interim Mayor of Milwaukie earlier this year, said.

Although the largest project by far is the new MAX Orange Line, opening September 12th, a number of smaller

investments have already begun to make significant impacts on the city.

“Many projects have been or will soon be completed that will help shape the next period for Milwaukie,” Interim Mayor Parks said. “The Riverfront Park’s second phase has been completed and many people are enjoying it daily.”

The park was recently renovated with a new boat launch, paths and public restrooms. Phase III of the project will include a playground and an open-air amphitheater, encouraging residents to make use of the attractive bit of real estate.

“The Orange Line is expected to bring folks who normally reside in urbanized areas of Portland and Oak Grove to the Willamette River to enjoy a variety of recreational activities and festivals that are scheduled to take place in upcoming years,” Mitch Nieman, assistant to the City Manager of Milwaukie, said.

In recent years, Milwaukie’s demographic make-up has been changing and the median age lowering. This is due, in part, to a new generation of families putting down roots in the area.

The downtown district has been undergoing intense renewal over the past ten years, and is now home to a farmers market and numerous small shops. The Orange Line will bring much needed business and will help the city grow more connected to Portland.

“Businesses will have an opportunity to market to new target audiences: those who commute to and from Portland and those who are restricted by limited transportation options. Businesses like Zoe Outfitters will increase their market exposure because they will be able to connect urban dwellers to water recreation activities,” Nieman continued.

And the new MAX line won’t be the only project to overhaul transportation

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in Milwaukie. Despite bordering Portland's Sellwood neighborhood, with its many bike commuters, and Eastmoreland (home of Reed College), Milwaukie has been sadly lacking in active transportation. The Milwaukie City Center is already a hub for many bus lines that reach into Portland and the outer rings of the metropolitan area, but the challenge of getting people from surrounding neighborhoods to downtown Milwaukie has opened opportunities for bikes.

The most direct route from Sellwood to downtown Milwaukie is a straight shot along 17th Avenue. It’s a narrow, two-lane

road with a steep grade on one side. It's already a thoroughfare for drivers which leaves little room for bikes.

Now, thanks to the Milwaukie City Council, there will be a new mixed-use bike path on the west side of the road. The roadbed will be moved east to make room for the 12-foot wide path — a feat of engineering considering the steep grade. When it opens, bikers and pedestrians will be able to travel between Sellwood and Milwaukie — and to and from the Orange Line — more easily.

Meanwhile, another mixed-use path has already opened to the south. The Trolley Trail, named after the abandoned interurban railroad grade it follows, extends six miles south to Gladstone. When the trail along 17th Avenue is completed, these two new trails will connect with the existing Springwater and Eastbank Esplanade trails to form a near-continuous path parallel to the Willamette River from the Clackamas River to the Steel Bridge.

Also on the horizon is a plan to turn Monroe Street, which runs parallel to the car-heavy Harrison Street in downtown Milwaukie, into a neighborhood greenway for bikes and pedestrians. The stretch of new greenway would run from 21st Avenue across Highway 224 and out to Linwood at the city's eastern boundary.

A “neighborhood greenway” is a low-traffic, low-speed route that provides a safe, quiet environment for motorists, pedestrians, and bicycles and reduces cut-through car traffic from outside of the neighborhood. Greenways reduce automobile speeds through the use of traffic-calming measures (such as mini traffic circles and speed bumps) to discourage car trips.

When the Monroe Street greenway is completed, it is expected that motorists will prefer to travel on the parallel arterials (Harrison and King streets) rather

than the Monroe greenway providing cyclists with a safe, continuous east-west route through Milwaukie.

Eventually, the greenway could be extended further east to Highway 213 (better known as 82nd Avenue) and connect to Clackamas Town Center and the Green Line, completing a path that was dreamed about some 40 years ago with the South-North Light Rail Project (see “How Light Rail Came to the Region” on the facing page).



For the hundreds of people who commute between Portland and Milwaukie every day, the new Portland to Milwaukie Orange Line will mean shorter trips and less congestion on Highway 99E.

Despite its proximity to Portland, transit to and from Milwaukie can be hit and miss. With the exception of the #75 bus, which comes from southeast Portland via Caesar Chavez Boulevard and Woodstock, most lines run along McLoughlin. When traffic flows well, a trip from downtown Portland to the Milwaukie City Center can take as little as 20 minutes. But increased traffic congestion during peak hours adds time and uncertainty to the trip and creates stress for commuters who are trying to catch connecting buses. For these commuters, the Orange Line will mean a quicker, more reliable and even scenic trip, in relative comfort as well as fewer missed connections when they get to Milwaukie's city center.

The Orange Line will run from Portland State University to Portland's eastside across the Tilikum Crossing. From there it will continue to just south of the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI), through the Brooklyn neighborhood, then to Eastmoreland and Westmoreland (at the S.E. Bybee Station), through the Ardenwald and Sellwood

*Despite its proximity to Portland, transit to Milwaukie can be hit and miss.*

# *How Light Rail Came to the Region*



**W**hen the Orange Line debuts, it will be almost thirty years since the first MAX line opened and TriMet stepped into the spotlight to become a national leader in public transit. But it wasn't always that way.

In the early 70s, it looked like public transit in Portland was dying out. Ridership had been falling since the 50s, and Rose City Transit Company, the primary transit service and one of 34 bus and trolley companies to operate in the Portland region in the past hundred years, was going bankrupt.

In a last-ditch effort, the City took over Rose City Transit and called for the creation of a new transit authority to run it. In early 1969, state legislation created the Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District of Oregon — TriMet for short — which immediately took over the former Rose City Transit.

Shortly after, in 1971, the "Transportation Plan for 1990" advised the creation of 54 highways and freeways, believing the bus system would only be used as a source for downtown rush hour commuters. In response, TriMet batted around the idea of developing European-style light rail lines running along the existing railroad lines.

In 1977 TriMet launched Fareless Square in an attempt to increase ridership downtown and reduce air pollution.

Portland had used rail transit in the past — trolley lines and San Francisco-style cable cars — but those systems had died out. Planners, however, saw a revival of rail in the region's future. Light rail had been used in Europe, but had only recently re-emerged in the US. The first modern system — albeit a fairly limited version — had just been opened in San Diego.

Ten years after Fareless Square, the first Metropolitan Area Express (or MAX) opened, connecting Portland to its easterly suburb of Gresham. The Blue Line was eventually extended, tunneling under the West Hills, out to Beaverton and Hillsboro.

In the 1990s, TriMet was looking to replicate its success with the Blue Line and launched a \$2.8 billion plan known as the South-North Light Rail Project to connect Clackamas Town Center to Vancouver, WA. It would have run from Clackamas Town Center through Milwaukie, along the Union Pacific right-of-way through Portland's Brooklyn neighborhood, to Portland's downtown and eventually north along Interstate Avenue to Vancouver.

In 1994, the plan was put to the region's voters, and nearly two-thirds of voters on the Oregon side of the river approved the \$475 million bond. Clark County voters, however, rejected a \$237.5 million bond that would have provided Washington's share of the funding.

On September 10, 2001, the Red Line opened connecting riders to Portland International Airport. In 2004, the northern stretch of what would have been the South-North line opened as the Yellow Line, stopping short of Vancouver and instead ending at the Expo Center. Five years later, the Green Line finally connected downtown Portland to Clackamas Town Center, but rather than running through Milwaukie, it made use of existing infrastructure and shares the east-west rails with the Blue and Red MAX Lines before turning south and following I-205 out to Clackamas.

Still, Milwaukie remained unserved. Now that's about to change.



Courtesy of the City of Milwaukie

## What Milwaukie Was, What Milwaukie Is

Milwaukie was founded in 1847 by entrepreneur Lot Whitcomb. Originally from Vermont, Whitcomb fell in love with Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which sits on the shore of Lake Michigan at the convergence of three rivers: the Milwaukee, the Menomonee, and the Kinnickinnic. The name "Milwaukee" came from a Native American word that referred to it as a "meeting place of waters."

Whitcomb's love for Milwaukee drove him to seek out a new "meeting place of waters." In 1847, he settled where Johnson Creek, Kellogg Creek, and other smaller creeks flowed into the Willamette.

Where the change in spelling came from is a bit of a mystery. Some say it was a practical joke one Milwaukee, Wisconsin, newspaper played on another involving stolen printing press type, while others say it was decided by the Post Office — or perhaps the railroads — to differentiate between the two cities.

It was in his new Milwaukie that Whitcomb built the first steam ship on the Willamette River, as well as a sawmill and gristmill. He later served as Clackamas County's representative in the Oregon Territorial Legislature from 1852 to 1853 and as postmaster of Milwaukie from 1851 to 1857.

Today, Milwaukie is home to some 20,000 residents, mostly white (88.5 percent according to the 2010 Census) with a median age of 39.9.

Milwaukie is home to several famous local businesses, most notably Bob's Red Mill — a modern-day grist mill — and Dark Horse Comics, publisher of several graphic novels that later became Hollywood films including "Sin City" and "300," and Chuck Palahniuk's "Fight Club 2."

Other notable businesses include Dave's Killer Bread, Breakside Brewing Co., Precision Castparts, and employee-owned grocery wholesale co-op, Unified Grocers (the city's largest employer).



Portland artist, Bill Will's boats "float" along the Orange Line

neighborhoods (the S.E. Tacoma Station), and into Milwaukie along McLoughlin Boulevard. Eventually the line may extend to Oregon City, but for now it will end at Park Avenue, just south of downtown Milwaukie.

Each station is fitted with art that illustrates something about the location's unique history or identity. The glass wind-screens on the shelters are etched with reeds and other designs found in nature.

A "sonic dish" is built into the support of the bridge deck, which will focus sound into a single point, as well as lights moving along the wall that echo the sounds of the river.

The Clinton Station features a giant sculpture made out of reclaimed freight rail, the shape representing the curves of the tracks of the transit system. Those traveling by bike to this station will appreciate artist Horatio Law's "Velosaurus," a set of eight panels set into the walls under the 17th Avenue overpass at Powell Boulevard that contain bicycle parts arranged to resemble the fossilized remains of dinosaurs. Clinton Street is a popular bicycle route and numerous changes were made to make route safer and more direct.

Portland artist, Bill Will — who also created a sculpture at the Washington Park Station — created a series of metal boats that appear to float along the line as it passes through Brooklyn, reflecting the origin of the neighborhood and its name. The area was originally called "Brook Land" in reference to the rivers and creeks that used to run through the area. One of them still flows, buried under what is now 17th Avenue. The Orange Line will run right over it. Over the years, Brook Land became known as "Brooklyn," a name it now shares with the adjacent Union Pacific rail yard, known as "the Brooklyn Yard."

*Portland artist, Bill Will, created a series of metal boats that appear to float along the line...*

At the S.E. Bybee Station, Dana Lynn Louis created a portrait of the area's Crystal Springs in stained glass that will illuminate the station's cupola. Lynn Basa used the nearby Rhododendron Gardens as inspiration for her shelter column mosaics.

Further south, at the Johnson Creek/Tacoma stop, artist Thomas Sayre created two sculptures of giant wheels made from compressed earth, a tip of the hat to Lot Whitcomb's historic sawmill that once stood there.

Milwaukie will see its share of new art and beautification too. "The city's new mural program has accepted the first mural, to be painted by local artist Chris Haberman," Interim Mayor Parks said. The mural, which will depict faces, places and phrases of Milwaukie, will be painted on the back of one of the Milwaukie High School buildings, facing the light rail stop at Main Street.



Divided by a river, Portland has been known for some years as "Bridgetown." There are currently a total of 15 cross-river bridges within the city of Portland (three spanning the Columbia River and 12 crossing the Willamette). The newest to the family, Tilikum Crossing, was built as a result of the Orange Line project.

The location of the new bridge was chosen as part of the 1994 South-North Project. It sits just south of the Marquam Bridge and is the nation's longest car-free urban crossing. While cars are banned, the bridge carries the new MAX line, TriMet buses, the Portland Streetcar, bicyclists and pedestrians. The #9 and #17 TriMet buses will move from the often-congested Ross Island Bridge to the new crossing.

The Tilikum Crossing was originally referred to as the "Portland-Milwaukie Light Rail Bridge" or the "Caruthers Bridge," in



**Tilikum Crossing Bridge**

reference to its name under the original 1994 transit project. The name “Tilikum Crossing” was chosen by a committee, appointed by TriMet, from a selection of names submitted by the public. The name itself pays respect to the indigenous Chinookan people, including the Clackamas tribe that inhabited what is now Milwaukie.

“Tilikum” is a Chinook word for people, tribe, or family. Other names considered were the “Abigail Scott Duniway Transit Bridge,” in honor of the Oregon suffragist, the “Cascadia Crossing Transit Bridge” and the “Wy’East Transit Bridge,” referring to a Native American name for Mount Hood.

The bridge will be temporarily opened on August 9th for the 20th Annual Providence Bridge Pedal, but will not officially open until September 12th.

**A**s Milwaukie enters this new phase, Interim Mayor Parks and others are optimistic about the future. They see new businesses and new transportation options as setting the right kind of stage for future development in the city they know and love.

“Several restaurants of a wide variety of foods already call Milwaukie home: chocolates, popcorn, coffee shops, wine and brew pubs. And there's room for more. With more people living in downtown the city will enjoy an even more robust economy, and be a safer environment as people make the center city their home.”

“The good news is that Milwaukie won't lose its community feeling. Its neighborhoods will continue to thrive, and the residents and visitors will enjoy the small, hometown feeling that exists today,” Parks said. **M**

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*Ben Maras is a Portland area freelance writer who grew up in Milwaukie, Oregon.*