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Making way for the Orange Line

A car-free bridge provides a transit link between Milwaukie and Portland

by Merry MacKinnon

After the Portland-Milwaukie Light Rail Project had identified its alignment and station locations, a glitch over a grant stalled early planning for development at two of the 10 stations sited in Portland.

When it opens in September, 2015, the 7.3-mile-long Orange Line to Milwaukie will start at Portland State University at Southwest 5th Avenue and Jackson Street, cross the Willamette River on the new transit bridge (currently under construction), pass by OMSI and part of Central Eastside Industrial District, trace the already existing railroad tracks through established inner southeast neighborhoods and continue on through Milwaukie and into Oak Grove.

Two of Portland's eastside Portland-Milwaukie Light Rail stations — Clinton at Southeast 12th Avenue and Rhine at Southeast 17th Avenue — are located in areas zoned for employment and industrial. In Portland, those sta-

tion areas — as well as South Waterfront on the westside — have significant development potential along the Light Rail to Milwaukie corridor.

With that in mind, the City of Portland's Bureau of Planning and Sustainability applied to Metro for a grant, funded by construction excise tax receipts, to plan for development at Clinton Street and Rhine Street Stations.

"We were trying to get a head start," said Southeast District Liaison Matt Wickstrom of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability. "Those two stations have the most development potential on the east side of the line."

But then planning for those stations was halted after Home Builders Association of Metropolitan Portland filed a lawsuit in 2010. The association claimed that Metro had exceeded its authority when Metro's construction excise tax sunsetted and Metro Council voted to extend the tax on new con-



A view looking north from the Ross Island Bridge of TriMet's new transit bridge construction.

Photograph courtesy of TriMet

struction for another five years and to use receipts to fund grants to support planning in Portland and other cities, including Milwaukie, within the existing urban growth boundary. “We believe we have the authority to do that,” said Metro’s Chief Financial Officer Margo Norton.

When Metro officials and Home Builders Association of Metropolitan Portland describe what type of Metro planning grants should be funded by receipts from a construction excise tax that started in 2006, they agree on one thing. Norton said that originally Metro’s tax was to raise \$6.3 million for concept planning grants in outlying areas that were being brought into the urban growth boundary. And Home Builders Association of Metropolitan Portland’s Government Affairs Manager Justin Wood agreed that the grants were to go for planning in new urban growth expansion areas.

But they don’t agree on what came later. “We’re not necessarily opposed in

general to the construction excise tax,” explained Wood. “But it was originally supposed to go for planning for new expansion (of the urban growth boundary), and when Metro brought it back they changed that for planning inside the city.”

Multnomah County Circuit Court decided in favor of Metro. Then, last June, Home Builders Association of Metropolitan Portland appealed and, as of early November, a final decision has not been rendered by Oregon Court of Appeals.

Other issues surround construction excise taxes in general, but as the tax issue pertains to the light rail, it’s not one that will have a significant impact, said Norton. “This is a teensy, tiny piece of the Milwaukie Light Rail Line,” she said.

But the dispute highlights how agency partners and supporters view not only the urban growth boundary, but also light-rail expansion. In the words of a Portland-Milwaukie Light Rail Project fact sheet: “Expanding transit options is essential to

both livability and economic vitality of our growing region, which is expected to add one million new residents and nearly 100,000 new jobs within the project corridor by 2030.”

Expanding light rail transit within the urban growth boundary represents an “evolution of thought” that started in the ’70s, said TriMet’s Alan Lehto, director of planning and policy. “In order to not have sprawl from here to Salem something needed to be done.”

The first thing was to draw a line around the region, Lehto said: “Second was to make the region more livable and encourage different types of transit and housing (within the boundary).”

With four MAX lines currently in place, the evolution has already transformed the region. Nevertheless, some are not pleased that Metro, Portland, and TriMet forged ahead with light rail. “I’ve never been a big fan of light rail. It costs too much — I’d go more with buses,” said Jon Chandler, chief executive officer of the Home Builders Association of Oregon. (Chandler said his Salem-based group stayed out of the Metro tax issue.) Emphasizing that he was only giving his personal opinion, Chandler laughed heartily and added: “But I lost that light-rail argument 20 years ago.”

Conservative groups such as the Cato Institute consider light rail an expensive boondoggle that forces fare increases, reduces bus service, and benefits downtown property owners at the expense of other property owners.

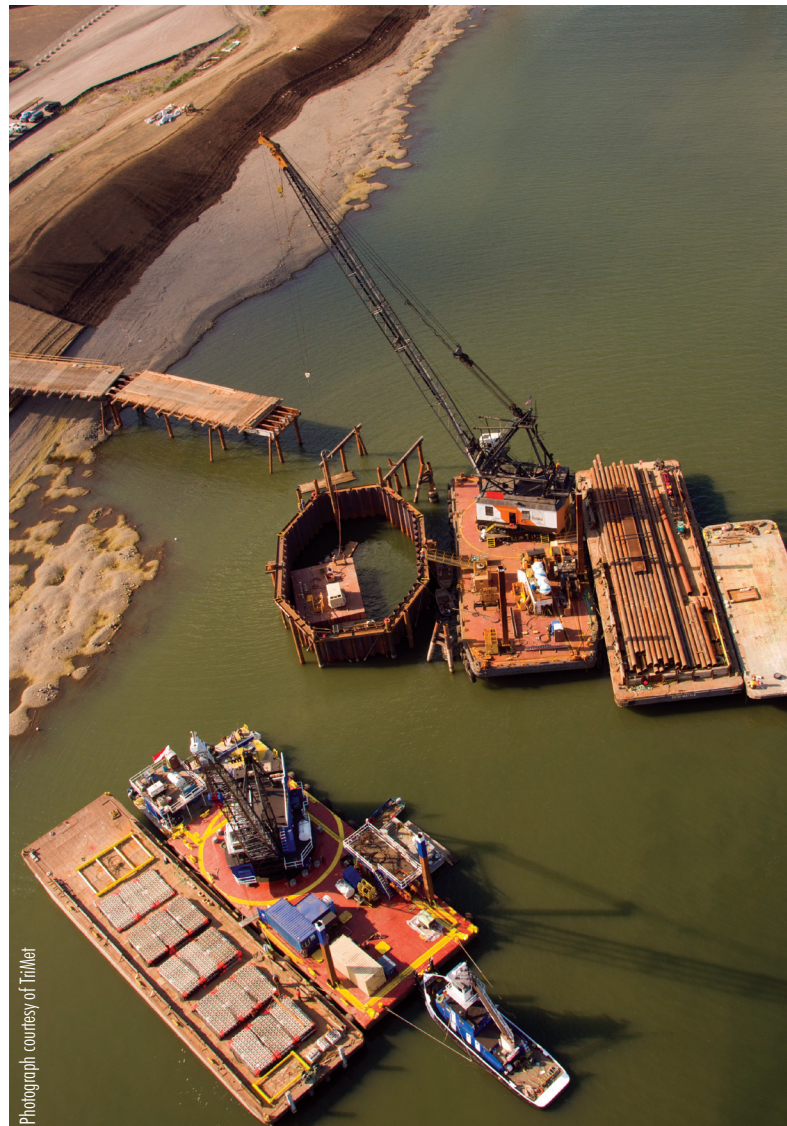
A spokesperson for Bus Riders Unite!, a Portland-based grassroots group organizing around transit justice, maintained that TriMet should have done a better job of analyzing the much less costly option of having rapid bus transit along the corridor to Milwaukie, which seems ideal for

that kind of transit, said Jonathan Ostar, co-director of OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon. (Currently, TriMet Bus Line 33-McLoughlin Boulevard provides high-frequency service between Portland and Milwaukie.) “We’re a little light rail crazy here in this region,” Ostar said. “That they’re continuing to use local general revenue dollars for a multi-billion dollar (\$1.49 billion) rail extension service at the same time as they’re cutting bus service is frankly a political choice that doesn’t best meet the needs of those who need transit the most.”

But in cities where light rail has a foothold, it’s viewed not only as a way to move people around, but as a development tool. According to a Center for Transit-Orient-

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Photograph courtesy of TriMet

ed Development report called Rails to Real Estate—which looked at development patterns along new light rail lines in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Denver, and Charlotte, North Carolina — after light rail went in, “all three transit lines experienced a tremendous amount of new development.”

The report found that factors influencing development along a light rail line include vacant land, underutilized property, employment, block patterns and walkability, transit connectivity, and household incomes.

In Portland, the neighborhoods adjacent to the Portland-Milwaukie Light Rail Project have most of those features, along with a healthy real estate market. It may not foster swaths of new subdivisions, but when the new light rail line to Milwaukie is completed, market-driven growth with more mixed-use and multi-housing development is expected to take place all along the corridors and around most of the stations, including downtown Milwaukie, which “has the right bones,” said TriMet’s Dave Unsworth, deputy director of the Portland-Milwaukie Light Rail Project.

“The alignment goes through the heart of things — through the neighborhoods,” Unsworth said.

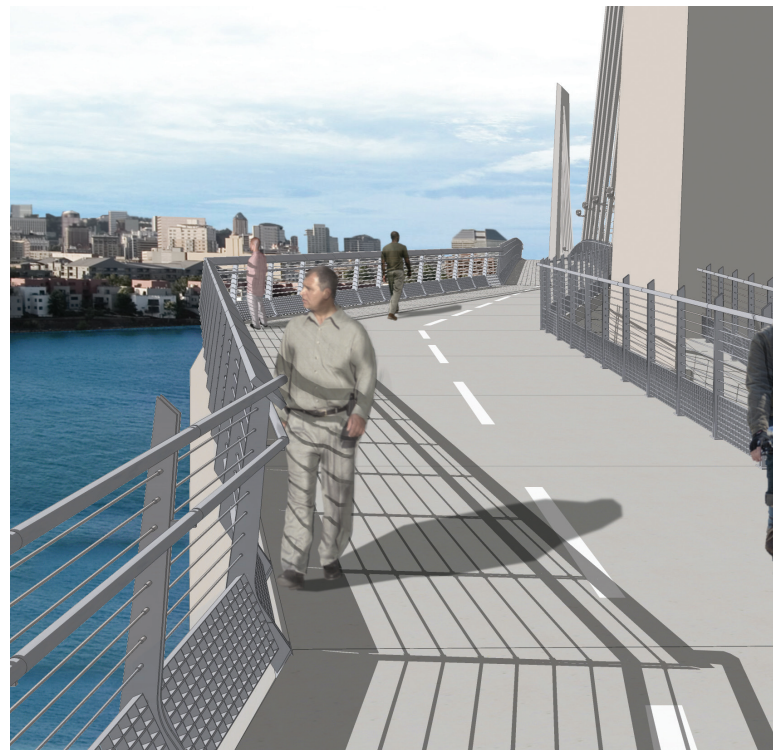
That doesn’t mean radical changes will transform the character of the inner southeast Portland neighborhoods — Hosford-Abernethy, Brooklyn, Sellwood-Moreland and Eastmoreland — through which the light rail travels. “Old established single-family neighborhoods will look the same — with more duplexes and accessory units,” Lehto said.

The light rail line creates a seam with industrial on one side and residential on the other, said Wickstrom, referring to Brooklyn neighborhood’s Southeast 17th Avenue. Besides expecting new develop-

ment in the Holgate Plaza, a mini-mall now owned by TriMet on Southeast 17th and Holgate, TriMet will lease a space in downtown Portland and turn over its current administrative offices next to the bus barn on 17th for use as TriMet’s operations center. Not far away, a pedestrian overpass will give employees at Fred Meyer’s headquarters access to light rail at Rhine Street Station.

Farther south, Tacoma Street station will construct a park-and-ride with spaces for 320 cars. The other park-and-ride, with 355 spaces, will be at Southeast Park Avenue station at the end of the line in northern Oak Grove. Placing a park-and-ride there was a strategic decision, Unsworth said: “We’re trying to get people out of their cars before they go through downtown Milwaukie.” With Tacoma Street designated for a potential street car in Portland’s Streetcar Master Plan, the

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An artist's rendering of the pedestrian and bicycle amenities that are integral to TriMet's new transit bridge project.

only station mentioned by officials without much development potential is the one in Sellwood-Moreland neighborhood at Southeast Bybee, which is bordered by a golf course and a park. The station, located beneath the Bybee Bridge, will be accessed via staircases and an elevator.

On the westside, the South Waterfront station area has the most potential for development, with 30 acres, owned by Zidell Companies, zoned for high density commercial mixed use, and another 20 acres slated for an Oregon Health and Science University satellite campus and the Collaborative Life Sciences Building, a joint effort between OHSU and the Oregon University System, including Portland State University and Oregon State University. “That will be a game changer,” Unsworth said. Light rail planning in South Waterfront is just a piece of an overall Urban Renewal District planning process

in place there, with forecasts of 10,000 new jobs and 5,000 additional housing units, said Troy Doss, senior planner with Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability.

The MAX Orange Line may also tip the scales in favor of a New Seasons, Whole Foods, or other grocery stores opening up at Southwest Fourth and Harrison. A Portland Development Commission market analysis, conducted by Marketek, Inc., found that the

site near PSU would attract consumers, not only from Portland State and the West Hills but from South Waterfront, who would likely get to the store on the streetcar and MAX Orange Line.

Ultimately, MAX Orange Line to Milwaukie is not expected to have the most ridership; the 33-mile long MAX Blue Line from Gresham to Hillsboro currently does and it’s much longer, Lehto said. “The westside has grown up around the Blue Line,” he added. However, many of Blue Line’s outer neighborhoods are served by car-dependent malls and don’t have sidewalks. In contrast, along Portland-Milwaukie MAX Line, the lack of a grocery store is the only thing keeping some communities from qualifying as 20-minute neighborhoods — meaning that food stores, restaurants, and retail services are all conveniently located within a short walking or bicycling distance.

Based on a 2005 survey of Interstate MAX Yellow Line riders, many Portland-Milwaukie MAX Orange Line riders will likely walk to the stations. In that survey, 70 percent of respondents said they walked to the Interstate light rail station platform. “With other light-rail developments we’ve seen increases in walking and biking,” said Rob Sadowsky, executive director of Portland’s Bicycle Transportation Alliance, a bicycling advocacy group. “And we think that will also happen with the Orange Line, particularly because it’s going through established neighborhoods with streets and sidewalks.”

With the Orange Line and Willamette River transit bridge projected to improve travel time between Milwaukie and Portland State by 29 percent, 20 minutes could include a quick combination of transit, walking, or biking across the river on the transit bridge. With new bike lanes and bike parking by the stations, there

20 minutes could include a quick combination of transit, walking, or biking across the river on a transit bridge.



Rendering courtesy of TriMet.

will be fewer gaps in the network, so after MAX to Milwaukie opens, Sadowsky figures more riders will trip chain, using multiple modes of travel — for instance, bicycling to stations, then hopping on MAX and transferring to buses to get to their destinations. Sadowsky also predicts an increase in commuting by bike, even for just part of the trip. “It will be more convenient and speedier,” he said.

As for the new Willamette River transit bridge, while bridge traffic will include TriMet buses, Sadowsky is delighted that it won’t include cars: “It’s fantastic,” he said, adding that bicyclists don’t get as nervous sharing a bridge with light-rail trains as they do with cars, because trains stay on tracks. (Bicyclists and pedestrians will also have their own lanes.) “So it’s comfortable for us bicyclists.”

And because there will be good connections to bike paths, bicyclists can avoid traffic altogether and take the Springwater Corridor and the Eastside Esplanade and cross the transit bridge at OMSI to South Waterfront station and onto westside bike paths.

Sadowsky praised TriMet and the the Portland Bureau of Transportation for inviting the bicycling community to weigh in on station designs, bike parking, and street intersections. “Together we’ve been able to come up with some pretty creative and safe designs,” he said, adding that designing grade-level light rail tracks at intersections where bicycles cross is trickier than some might think. “It’s important to have bikes cross tracks perpendicularly; otherwise, the bike wheels get stuck in the tracks,” he said.

Even congested places for bikes, like the southeast side of the light rail station at OMSI, where bicyclists will have to contend with freight, pedestrians, buses, trucks and cars, have been carefully stud-

ied and planned on paper by transportation engineers. “Time will tell how well those plans worked when we get on the street,” Sadowsky said.

According to TriMet, the new light rail to Milwaukie will increase work trips to downtown Portland by 20 percent — reducing vehicle trips each weekday by 9,100. Along with the new transit bridge, the Portland-Milwaukie light rail will change people’s behavior, Lehto said. “There will be more walking, bicycling, and transit use and less driving.”

But critics are right about bus service cutbacks: When the Orange Line opening approaches, TriMet will look at eliminating bus routes that duplicate service, which means that the high-frequency TriMet Bus Line 33-McLoughlin will likely end. “When we get a little closer to opening and we understand more about demands, then we’ll be going to the public about options,” Lehto said.

As for what will happen if the court rules in favor of Homebuilders Association of Metropolitan Portland, current planning grants awarded by Metro will have to be paid back, at half the awarded amount, with Metro covering the other half, Norton said. But early on, the city dropped pursuit of the planning grant for those Clinton and Rhine Street stations. “We ceased having the station-area discussion group planning sessions a year and a half ago,” Wickstrom said. It’s not that much of a setback anyway, he added. A lot of what happens will depend on the market. “And we have the potential to look at zoning and development in the Comprehensive Plan.” **M**

Portland freelance writer Merry MacKinnon often rides her bike, TriMet buses and MAX and doesn’t own a car.