

Chapter 9

Transportation Planning in the Portland Metropolitan Area

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The Portland Metropolitan area is considered a leader in transportation planning (Lee, 1977). Its downtown transit mall and fareless square are innovations which have received broad recognition (Dueker, et al, 1982). The recent integration of a light rail corridor into the mass transit system appears to be similarly successful. Yet, transportation planning in Portland is not marked by these physical elements alone.

The planning process was and is marked by strong citizen participation, a balance between public and private modes of transportation, and a use of transportation infrastructure to advance land use and development goals in the metropolitan area. Principal among the goals of the Downtown Plan developed in the 1970's was transforming a downtown on the verge of decay into a growing, vital center for the urban area. Development in the confined space of the downtown required good public transit access. Dependence on autos alone would have choked the city with congestion and air pollution. It would have meant exorbitant expenditures on additional freeways and continued transportation support for the development of suburban centers. Hence, the necessity of a balanced policy was clear in the minds of planners and decision makers. From this recogni-

tion flowed the mall, Fareless Square, and Light Rail development. A metropolitan area transportation plan focused on the downtown was initiated and has moved forward through many milestones. Portland was not unique, however, downtown goals dominated the urban transportation planning process in many cities (Adler, 1986).

As the city moves through the eighties into the nineties, questions about planning processes and their outcomes inevitably emerge. Can a plan oriented to centralization function effectively in an urban area subject to ongoing decentralization forces? Is the present and envisioned infrastructure appropriate to the needs and desires of the current and future population of the region? Are the issues of environmental awareness and energy efficiency, which reinforce the use of transit, as critical in the next decade as they were in the past two? In short, can an ambitious effort to insure the dominance of a central business district in the metropolitan region survive new realities? And, given the great investment Portland has made to that end, if it doesn't work here can it work anywhere? This paper attempts to give at least one perspective on answers to these questions.

PORTLAND'S TRANSIT SYSTEM - THE RESULT OF A FREEWAY REVOLT

As in most cities, Portland did not always move people primarily by automobiles, nor was its transit principally provided by buses. Arriving in Portland in 1912 one would have found an extensive system of streetcars and interurban trains, approximately 180 miles of them. On average, every mile of every run had 6.8 passengers using it. By this criteria, streetcar transit was at its ascendancy in that year (Labbe, 1980). In a Portland with a population of approximately 260,000, nearly 90,000,000 trips were taken on the rail system in 1912. Use of all other modes of transit was minor by comparison. There were some automobiles, a few jitneys, and no buses.

The first buses, four of them, came in 1924 with routes on the east side of the Willamette River. Trolley buses (coaches) were added in 1936. The last streetcar went out-of-service in 1950, and the few remaining trolley coaches ended service in 1958 (Sebree and Ward, 1974). By 1969, the year the current regional transit authority, Tri-Met, began operation, ridership had dropped to 16 million trips on a fleet of 205 buses. At that time major freeway investments were under consideration. The Mt. Hood Freeway, a major East-West corridor between downtown Portland and the growing eastern suburbs and satellite towns of East Multnomah county, was the immediate focus of interest. The current transportation system emerged from actions which ultimately led to withdrawing that proposed freeway. An understanding of what took place starts with insights into the geography, transit market, and political processes in the metropolitan area in the 1970's.

THE GEOGRAPHIC CONTEXT

The Portland SMSA is made up of four counties, Washington, Multnomah (containing Portland), and Clackamas Counties in Oregon and Clark County in Washington (Figure 9.1) Portland is generally flat on the east side of the Willamette River with a strong grid street pattern. Bordering the CBD to the west, the Tualatin mountains form a strong physiographic barrier and rise to an elevation of approximately 1,000 feet (Roberts, 1986).

The decade of the 1970's was a time of growth for the Portland SMSA as a whole. Population went from 1,000,129 to 1,242,594, an increase of 24.24 percent. The suburban counties of Washington, Clark, and Clackamas grew 55.7, 45.7 and 49.6 percent respectively, while the city of Portland lost 4.2 percent in population. Multnomah County, which includes the city, grew only 1.1 percent (Roberts, 1986).

The Portland SMSA exhibits many of the population and employment decentralization trends identified at the national level (Fulton, 1986). Portland's suburban areas are and were growing at a faster rate than the central city in both population and employment. Portland exhibited a decline in central city population, a trait commonly found in larger eastern cities (Roberts, 1986).

While the total number of potential transit riders was increasing in the SMSA, the "choice riders" were gravitating to the suburbs while "captive riders," the elderly and those with low incomes, were concentrating in the central city. The central city needed blanket coverage with a generally accessible mode of transit, i.e. buses, and the choice riders in suburbs needed to be lured onto attractive transit for a commute (Roberts, 1986).

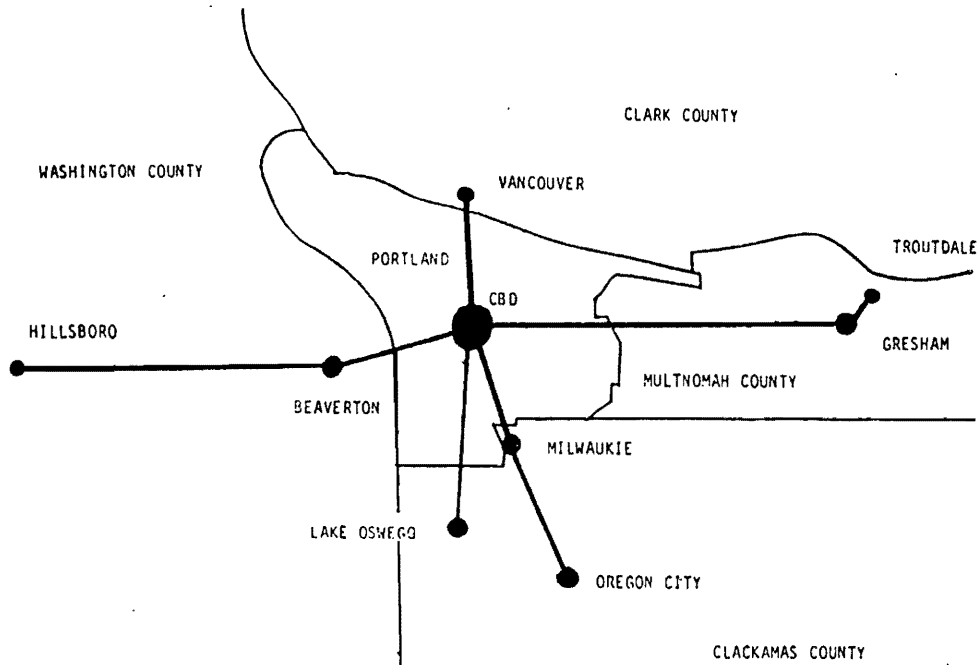


Figure 9.1 Counties of the Portland SMSA with suburban cities and major travel corridors (scale: 2 inches equal 5 miles).

THE GOVERNMENTAL PLAYERS

Several governments and their leaders had interests in the transportation planning process. At the time of Tri-Met's formation, the Metropolitan Service District (Metro), then known as the Columbia Region Association of Governments, was functioning as the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for the SMSA. The MPO is still housed there. Given that the MPO is the organization which functions as the clearing house for all transportation programs involving intergovernmental cooperation and federal funds, it is the arena in which local transportation planning battles are eventually fought. Metro is a regional government, while CRAG was a council of governments. Voting rights in the council were allo-

cated largely on population criteria. Hence, the larger jurisdictions, e.g., the City of Portland and Multnomah County, could strongly influence the decisions of the MPO on the region's Transportation Improvement Plan (TIP).

In the 70's, the then Mayor of Portland, Neil Goldschmidt, mobilized a movement to create a greater role for transit in the metropolitan area, in large part to insure a viable downtown. Multnomah County Commissioners Mel Gordon and Don Clark supported this interest. They were concerned with an overemphasis on the highway transportation planning process. Clark and Goldschmidt provided the critical leadership, despite the absence of existing technical substantiation, to persuade the Governor to convene a Blue Ribbon Task Force to investigate transportation in the metropolitan area.

A Governor's Task Force (GTF) existed from 1972-1975, producing a

major report which set the technical systems context for subsequent transportation planning. The GTF was charged with evaluating transit alternatives for the region and identifying possible corridors. Five principal corridors were finally evaluated. The report concluded that the choice of mode should be based on factors other than simple ridership. These included flexibility, adaptability and environmental effects.

During this period the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) and Tri-Met, the principal transportation agencies, had very different roles and responsibilities. ODOT was the highway agency. Its agenda diverged from that of the two principal local governments in the region. Utilizing a neighborhood highway revolt against the proposed Mt. Hood Freeway, Portland and Multnomah County were able to impede the highway emphasis of ODOT and persuade it to reconsider transportation options for the metropolitan area. As the agency with the greatest transportation technical strength, albeit highway-oriented, ODOT was a necessary participant in transportation decision making. Only during the last part of the 1970's when the transit alternatives were fixed parts of the transportation system did it become a willing supporter of reduced highway systems.

Tri-Met, during this period, was a weak player in the decision system. Created in 1969, it lacked the institutional strength and capacity to make an effective contribution to the transportation revolution. Preoccupied with resurrecting and efficiently managing a formerly private bus system, it had little in-house planning expertise. Indeed, a former Tri-Met official characterized the agency as "unable to site a bus shelter" at that time. As the change

in transportation systems unfolded during the decade, Tri-Met began to realize that it would be left to operate the transit component of the newly developed program, regardless of what that component was. Spurred by a need to insure its role in the decision process and not wanting to be left with a white elephant it couldn't operate, Tri-Met established its position in the decision process by commissioning a Light Rail Transit feasibility study and the 1990 Transit Plan. The result was the assertion of Tri-Met's role and the subsequent development of its staff and technical capacity. It was not, however, until the end of the decade that the agency assumed any real leadership in the process.

Transportation planning in the early and middle 1970's was dominated by the City of Portland and Multnomah County because of their superior technical capacity and control of the MPO for transportation. Only the initiation of light rail construction allowed Tri-Met the opportunity to assume equal status. Yet this dominance was not, in itself, the critical factor in the institutional landscape of transportation planning in that period.

The glue which held the region together through a major shift in transportation emphasis was a "pot-of-gold" in the form of withdrawal of the Mt. Hood Freeway from the Interstate system. Freeing up about \$200 million in interstate substitution funds, this withdrawal supported the common interest around which the new regional transportation system was designed. The monies were used for 140 highway and transit projects, including the Banfield Transitway (highway improvements and light rail line). These projects were spread throughout the region and used by Metro to cement a regional consen-

sus which overcame substantial federal opposition to the Light Rail (Edner, 1985).

THE CURRENT CLIMATE AND PRESSURES FOR CHANGE

According to Altshuler (1979), three factors are needed for a substantial shift in public policy -- a crisis, a movement and a leader. All three factors were present in Portland in the 1970's in the form of an energy crisis, both an environmental and an inner city revitalization movement, and Mayor Neil Goldschmidt. Portland is widely recognized as an innovator because substantial shift in transportation policy did occur.

The freeway revolt in Portland took place in an era of heightened environmental awareness. This awareness included the concept of urban growth management as part of Oregon's statewide land use planning process (Edner, 1985). In Portland this meant urban growth containment and the use of transportation investments to achieve higher land use densities and greater dependency on transit. Conventional wisdom within urban growth management was that sprawl could be stemmed. Nationally, as well as locally, it is evident that transportation plans to support growth containment have not slowed decentralization (Fulton, 1986; Roberts, 1986). The region is currently faced with the task of rethinking transportation policies and plans that are based on strategies to centralize population. This is not occurring:

Second auto ownership is increasing nationally and locally. Unless drastic macroeconomic or new petroleum based disruptions occur, it is likely to continue to increase. The fastest growing, and as yet largely untapped transit market is that of the inter- and intra-

suburban commuter. It is unlikely that conventional fixed route bus or rail service will be able to attract a substantial share of this travel market. The type of transit service extended to this market must be able to compete favorably with the auto in terms of travel time and convenience. With the abundance of free parking and ease of auto accessibility in suburban areas, innovative strategies will be necessary to increase transit's share of this market.

Third, Portland's transit system is heavily CBD-oriented. This market is currently quite strong and any immediate downturn in the CBD market is not expected. However, it is unlikely to grow; expansion potential in the transit market will be in the suburban areas (Roberts, 1986).

PRESENT ISSUES

The energy crisis and environmental movement have faded in the public consciousness. The new crisis is one of government finance and the effects of tax limitation and privatization or public and quasi-public services. In the Portland metropolitan area there is a so-called "leadership gap". The region is awaiting someone to propose innovative solutions to build the coalitions necessary to implement those solutions.

Mass transit was widely believed to be the way to achieve the land use and environmental goals of the 1970's (Altshuler, 1979), and the necessary conditions for change were present then. Now transit does not seem to be capable of bringing about substantial change, nor is it clear what change is desired.

THE EMERGING PERSPECTIVE

The political and technical marriage that produced the Banfield light rail

transit project met the tests of political and technical feasibility. The technicians and politicians believed that the light rail transit would work, was cost effective, and would be the center piece of Portland's transit future. In retrospect, however, the decision took place in an evolving technological context. The expectations of the 1970's concerning transit's ability to solve land use, environmental, and energy problems were very high. These expectations have been tempered with greater recognition that such impacts are seldom or at best narrowly achieved.

The 1980's have brought many changes. There is mounting evidence that mass transit is not going to solve all urban ills (Jones, 1985). Transportation is no longer perceived to have the ability to shape urban form because it provides no accessibility advantages to riders (Meyer and Miller, 1984). Transit ridership began declining in 1981 and the subsidy needed for operations began rising (CWFF, 1985). The proportion of people who both live and work in suburbs in Portland grew from 35.5% in 1970 (slightly below the national average) to 42.3 percent in 1980 (slightly above the national average). At the same time auto ownership has increased with a definite trend towards one vehicle per licensed driver (Highway Users Federation, 1986).

Political leadership in the Portland area is diffuse. Portland may have dominated during the 1970's, but the long term trend towards suburban independence has returned in the 1980's (Abbott, 1983). Tri-Met's managers have been questioned because of overly optimistic forecasts and experiments with articulated buses and automated fare systems which were not totally successful (CWFF, 1985). Today the agency is going through an adjustment period

with an entirely new board. The region's metropolitan planning organization, Metro has lost its lever to move transportation issues with the depletion of the Mt. Hood withdrawal funds. That source of glue for coalitions has been exhausted. At the same time the suburbs have reasserted their independence and transit has lost credibility, the auto and highway lobbies have re-emerged. They assert that the most mobility for dollars is gained with highways, not transit systems. Transit systems are only needed to assure basic mobility (Highway Users Federation, 1986). The philosophy that transportation should follow rather than lead land use and demographic trends is re-emerging with these lobbies.

THE FUTURE OF TRANSPORTATION PLANNING IN THE REGION

It appears that public transportation will play a more reactive than a preactive role in the future. Meanwhile, highways are being re-emphasized as an important element of economic development for the region. State legislation now allows the ODOT to invest in off-(State) highway system improvements that promote economic development. Counties and cities are competing for the same economic development projects and are each requesting state aid for their jurisdiction. The current financial glue seems to favor random and diversive system extension. A coalition for major, concerted efforts seems unlikely.

Portland has achieved considerable recognition for the success of central area and radial transportation investments that have strengthened the downtown. Yet urban development trends are not easily swayed, and the region faces the problem of serving a dispersed development pattern. The fai-

ture of the land use-transportation interactions to occur as expected raises important implications concerning the reversibility of long term decentralization and reactive transportation system development. Portland was, in effect, fighting the continued trend toward suburbanization. Yet, recent thinking challenges the likelihood of reversing this trend. Altshuler (1979) observes that growth along transit lines since the pre-1920 era is largely unrelated to the proximity of transit. There is evidence that suburban growth is more efficient than planners once believed (Altshuler, 1979, Fulton, 1986), and that decentralization may be a more rational direction for growth than high density urban development. Further, there is no indication of a future decrease in private automobile use. This new evidence suggests that Tri-Met, and other transit agencies, may have misassessed the impetus and consequences of decentralization and erred in attempting to reverse them.

The region's motivation to reverse long term trends in its planning may have been rooted in the pressure to use transit systems as economic development tools, to foster continued growth and investment in the urban core. Specifically, light rail transit in Portland was molded to serve a commuter ridership for economic development and environmental goals. A substantial cost to Tri-Met and the public was not closely considered.

Regardless of the origin of these development goals, Tri-Met has embraced them with the existing transit system, and used them as rationale for future expansion. Yet, evidence suggests that downtown growth-oriented transit projects, including radial line, articulated buses, the transit mall, and light rail transit, are delivering little additional

investment stimulus. Growth along the downtown mall has not occurred at a faster rate than it would have without the project, and land values have not achieved a noticeable gain there (Dueker, 1982).

Thus, the principal successes of transportation planning in Portland are in achieving the construction and operation of a number of highly visible system elements. These will remain as the physical artifacts of the social movements, economic realities, and political interplay of the 1970's. The mall has added to the quality of the built environment in the downtown and the light rail seems initially successful in capturing downtown focus and some suburban/city commuting. Yet the overall trend of decentralization seems unaffected. Any success in this direction is, at best, minimal.

The bright success of the 1970's in institutional structures supporting political decision-making has faded. The institutions have changed, leadership has changed, the issue context has changed, and there are no pot-of-gold transfer funds to ease decisions on resource allocations. The true measure of the importance of the Portland experience to urban transportation will be taken in the next decade. The work of the last two decades will not serve the realities of the next two. Coalitions of a more diffuse power structure will likely emerge. Will they be able to develop strategies to provide a transportation system optimized to contemporary visions of transportation futures, and will those visions be accurate?

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