Eugene and Lane County Oregon

2022 highway expansion plans

Beltline - Route 126 widenings
Beltline and 126 widenings
lessons from stopping the West Eugene Porkway

LOW BUILD ALTERNATIVES
fiscally constrained
climate concerned
peak traffic and peak energy
legal and ethical
planning for a possible, positive future
requires changing assumptions
about endless growth on a
round, abundant, finite Earth

Mark Robinowitz • road scholar
PeakChoice.org • PeakTraffic.org • SustainEugene.org
ODOT's approval kept quiet from the public

ODOT has been considering a massive widening of Beltline highway since the previous millennium. After numerous iterations, they approved an expansion in March 2022 - without much notice nor soliciting any public comments. ODOT did not even bother to post a copy of their approval documents to our publicly funded website. In September 2022, I filed a formal request for a copy of the “Finding of No Significant Impact” and “Categorical Exclusion” … and after a few days, ODOT finally posted a copy on the website. Despite being a project likely to cost over a third of a billion dollars, public input was ignored. It took years for ODOT to scrounge up the five million dollars to pay for the study and there is no money available for the construction cost. Technically, ODOT's approval had to be ratified by the Federal Highway Administration, Oregon Division, since the project will likely be funded with federal gas tax money. Title 23, United States Code, governs how these projects are approved. "Categorical Exclusion" means a federally approved project is supposedly too minor to require public input about the impacts. A third of a billion dollar highway expansion that would have 10 to 16 lanes is apparently considered too trivial for the illusion of democracy.

From: CARY Molly A
Subject: RE: Public Records Request
Date: October 10, 2022 at 8:54 AM
To: Mark Robinowitz

Mr. Robinowitz -

The Categorical Exclusion signed by FHWA is posted on the project website for Beltline, ODOT project number 16223, at this link:


If you have difficulty accessing the document please let me know.

Again, thank you for your interest.

Molly Cary
ODOT
Area 5 Transportation Project Manager
ODOT “public engagement” summary ignored decades of public input

ODOT’s addendum to their approval of the Beltline widening ignored substantive comments informally submitted over more than two decades. These concerns included “induced demand” (building road capacity can make traffic worse by encouraging more driving) and “Peak Vehicle Miles Traveled” (traffic on the ODOT network has peaked in Lane County, according to ODOT, and oil depletion makes further reductions inevitable).

Induced demand did get a mention in the public engagement summary but there is not any discussion in the Finding of No Significant Impact about how the Beltline widening would or would not cause this problem. There is no discussion of the critical role this highway expansion would have regarding additional expansions of Eugene, especially onto nearby farmland. This concern has been echoed in other highway expansions around the country, including some that have been stalled in federal court (I-355 in Illinois, the Chicago outer bypass, was blocked for years because the approval ignored this). Unfortunately, the deregulation of the judicial system has made environmental lawsuits much less effective (the extension of I-355 was eventually built, further facilitating continued sprawl in the outer suburbs).

Induced demand used to be a major concern for highway expansions but the arrival of Peak VMT makes this less of a concern. Growth in highway traffic leveled off a decade and a half ago, sustained by the energy pulse of fracked oil and tar sands mining (which offset the continued decline of conventional oil and increased the total available liquid fuels available for transportation and other uses). Fracked oil peaked in 2019 in the USA and is unlikely to be increased further. Here in Cascadia most of our liquid fuels come from the Alaska pipeline, which peaked in 1988 at over 2 million barrels per day but now is under a half million per day.

I have heard a few planners at the City of Eugene, ODOT, Federal Highway Administration, other government agencies and private contractors who have acknowledged this is a legitimate concern, but none have dared share their private views in public. My guess is the transportation industrial complex will continue planning an infinite growth future until physical limits become more apparent and then they will pretend that no one could have seen this coming.

- Mark Robinowitz, PeakChoice.org, PeakTraffic.org, SustainEugene.org
ODOT 2014 study: Beltline cross sections across the river

ODOT has not released cross section graphic showing the 2018 version which would have 10 lanes of bridge across the river and up to 16 lanes between the river and Delta highway.
We are at Peak Traffic, not no traffic, so a bridge across the river will continue to be essential. We have enough physical resources and money to replace the bridge with a structure that will still be useful after the arrival of oil rationing.

Long term plans should consider fiscal constraints, peak traffic, climate change, and energy depletion. Concrete and steel require a lot of fossil fuels. We should be wise about using what is left.

Beltline is the last highway bridge in Eugene that has not been repaired or replaced to cope with the looming Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake.

A low build alternative could replace the worn out Beltline bridge with a new structure (where the yellow lines are). The curvature of the mainline could be adapted to transfer the traffic.

Replacing the old Beltline bridge, built before the seismic risk was discovered, with a new bridge of the same width should be enough for the rest of the oil age.
2014 “low build” option
most of this was built as the Delta - Beltline interchange expansion removed “weaving” movements was larger than “Low Build Concept” (double lane off ramp northbound to westbound) no longer considered part of Beltline study from Delta to River Road

we’re at Peak Traffic, not low traffic including oil depletion and other limits to growth into traffic projections would make a comprehensive Low Build alternative easier to approve as meeting the real “purpose and need” for the region.

Delta - Beltline project cost $20 million full Beltline widening across river could cost over a third of a billion
Troubled Bridges Over Water

Tens of thousands of highway and rail bridges across the country are worn out, rusting, frayed from decades of too many trucks and freight trains. Oregon has numerous broken bridges along I-5, I-84 and many other routes, but has only had funding to fix some of them.

ODOT and local governments used the replacement of the cracked I-5 Willamette River bridge as an opportunity to double the width of the highway - even though we are passing the end of cheap oil and the start of climate change. Replacing worn out bridges with new bridges OF THE SAME WIDTH would save tax dollars that could be used to fix more dangerous bridges before entropy or the Cascadia Subduction earthquake makes them unusable. Public safety and fiscal constraints mean that expansion plans be canceled in favor of maintenance and repair.

I-5 Eugene-Springfield
worn out bridge replaced with two new, larger bridges

I-35 Minneapolis
2007 collapse
Beltline widening would not have the same legal obstacles that stopped the proposed West Eugene Porkway (discussed later in this slideshow). There are no parks in the path, no critical habitat for endangered species, minimal area of wetlands (and it is legal to destroy wetlands if so-called mitigation sites are made elsewhere) and the environmental impact it would have at the river crossing is within the "acceptable" limit.

There is a novel approach to force a Low Build type option, but before getting to that, a description of a parallel proposal to widen 126 from Eugene to Veneta, lessons learned from stopping the WEP, and then, a legal strategy that might not only prevent overwidening Beltline but set a precedent that could impact a trillion dollars of new and expanded highways across the country.

ODOT prepared a Categorical Exclusion for Beltline instead of an Environmental Impact Statement or Environmental Assessment. In less legalese language, this means ODOT is bypassing the normal legal requirements for disclosing impacts. Later in this slideshow is discussion of the National Environmental Policy Act which requires these documents. "C.E." is a way to avoid wasting too much money and time preparing unnecessary reports but was not intended for projects that could cost over a third of a billion dollars with years of construction disruption. This fits a pattern of using CE to ignore disclosing the impacts of many levels of federal timber sales on National Forests and other destructive proposals. In short, deregulation of protections established a half century ago during the peak of federal environmental regulation and laws.
Highway 126 widening: Eugene to Veneta

OR 126W Spot Improvements with separated multi-use path: $15 million

OR 126W Three-Lane Alternative with separated multi-use path
- Causeway on Dike: $95 million
- Causeway on Piers: $145 million

OR 126W Four-Lane Alternative with separated multi-use path
- Causeway on Dike: $130 million
- Causeway on Piers: $195 million

Widening over the water would be the most expensive part.

No cost estimate is available for a Low Build alternative that would combine "spot improvements," traffic calming, other safety design considerations and perhaps a passing lane or two on the sections not crossing Fern Ridge reservoir or wetlands. This would be cheaper than the "three lane alternative" and potentially affordable.

graphics and cost from ODOT's 2013 study

www.oregon.gov/odot/Projects/Project%20Documents/21231_OR126_fern_ridge_corridor_plan_2013.pdf
In 2001, I asked then State Representative Floyd Prozanski what he thought of the West Eugene Porkway. He said he was against it, partly because it would force a "causeway" (his term) across the lake. He added he grew up in San Antonio, Texas and knew about the Brackenridge Park freeway fight. In the 1960s, a highway was planned through that park, a main green space in that city. Efforts to stop that road included passage of Section 4(f), authored by Senator Ralph Yarborough of Texas. There is a deeper look at 4(f) later in this presentation, it prevented the WEP.

During the peak of the WEP controversy, ODOT and FHWA officials were reluctant to say anything about what I called Phase 3 of the WEP: the extension all the way to Veneta. They knew that this would be difficult to permit under the Clean Water Act, and segmentation of the WEP's approval to avoid the ecological and economic impacts of this future extension would be especially illegal. Segmentation violates the National Environmental Policy Act and segmentation to avoid consideration of Section 4(f), the Clean Water Act and Endangered Species Act is as illegal as a highway project can be.

In 2022, ODOT is planning the causeway even though WEP was canceled in 2007. Endangered species are more concentrated in the wrong-of-way of the WEP, but there are critical habitats directly next to 126. (Fender's Blue Butterfly is vulnerable to highway lighting). ODOT is planning to approve this with a "Categorical Exclusion," instead of an Environmental Impact Statement. Even an Environmental Assessment that results in a "Finding of No Significant Impact" would be less inappropriate.
Figure 7a: The Eight Alternatives

- **No Build**
- **Lowest Build**
- **Low Build**
- **Medium Build**

- **Highway 126 Route No-Build Alternative** would construct no improvements. OR 126W would maintain one travel lane in each direction, with left-turn lanes where they currently exist. The shoulders would continue to vary in size.

- **Highway 126W Route Transportation System Management Alternative** would include no roadway widening (OR 126W would maintain the existing cross-section). Lower cost improvements would be implemented such as improved signing and roadway striping, alternate mobility standards or transit and access management enhancements.

- **Highway 126W Route Three Lane Alternative** would widen OR 126W to include one travel lane in each direction and a center lane for either turning or passing as appropriate. The shoulders would be widened to eight feet.

- **Highway 126W Route Four Lane Alternative** would widen OR 126W to include two travel lanes in each direction. The shoulders would be widened to eight feet. Dedicated left-turn lanes would be added where appropriate.

**ODOT plan**

- **Southern Route Two/Three Lane Alternative** would modify Perkins and Cantrill Roads where needed to include additional turn lanes and widened shoulders. The roadways would transition between two and three lanes.

- **Southern Route Multi-use Path Alternative** would construct a multi-use path for pedestrian and bicycle travel between Huston Road and Green Hill Road generally near the Perkins and Cantrill Road alignments. No additional roadway improvements would be constructed (OR 126W would maintain the existing cross-section).

- **Northern Route Alternative** would modify Territorial Highway, Clear Lake, and Green Hill Roads where needed to include additional turn lanes and widened shoulders. The roadways would transition between two and three lanes.

North of Fern Ridge, ODOT probably will want that too.
Spot improvements may include left-turn lanes (○), right-turn lanes (●), traffic signals (□), limited passing lanes, and wider shoulders, especially where current shoulders are only 4 feet wide. A multi-use trail alongside the highway (□) would also be a potential addition to the corridor. In addition, transit stop improvements (□) may include far-side bus stop relocations, bus pullouts, landing pads, and pedestrian crossing treatments. Emergency turnarounds and police pull-offs may also be provided on the side of the road at select locations.

Legend:
- OR 126W Study Area
- Railroad
- City Limit
- Park
- Potential Traffic Signal and/or Raised Roadway Elevation (Due to Proximity of RR Tracks)
- Potential Traffic Signals and/or Raised Roadway Elevation Due to Proximity and Higher Elevations of RR Tracks
- Standard WB Right-Turn Lane at Elevator Rd
- EB Left-Turn Lanes and/or Access Management at Driveways
- EB Left-Turn Lanes and/or Access Management at Driveways at Ken Nelsen Rd
- WB Left-Turn Lane at Ken Nelsen Rd
- Cross-Section Elements:
  - Existing Left-Turn Lanes
  - Existing Bridge
  - Existing Guardrail
  - Existing Transit Stop
  - Existing Typical Two-Lane Cross-Section (with Potential Addition of Multi-Use Trail)

Figure 3
Spot Improvements Conceptual Alternative
1. HUSTON ROAD: Two lane roundabout or traffic signals.
2. ELLMAKER ROAD: Two lane roundabout or turn lane improvements.
3. CENTRAL ROAD: Two lane roundabout or traffic signals.
4. FISHER ROAD: Two lane roundabout or turn lane improvements.
5. GREENHILL ROAD: Two lane roundabout or traffic signals.
Three lanes on land, two over water could be a reasonable Low Build alternative.
Fig. A: Multiuse Section with Swale Separation

Fig. B: Multiuse Section with Barrier Separation

Typical Four-Lane Cross-Section*

The four-lane cross-section would include a center left-turn lane (16 feet wide) in place of the median at applicable intersections.

Cross-Section Elements

- Existing Left-Turn Lanes
- Existing Guardrail
- Existing Bridge

Legend:
- OR 126W Study Area
- City Limit
- Railroad
- Park

Design Option: Causeway on Piers†

†A causeway on piers is an optional design feature that may be used over environmentally sensitive areas. Pedestrian and bicycle facilities may be included on the structure or provided on a lower level on the side of the structure.

Figure 5
FOUR-LANE CROSS-SECTION WITH OPTIONAL CAUSEWAY ON PIERS CONCEPTUAL ALTERNATIVE
West 11th / 126 west of Green Hill
about one mile east of the WEP's western terminus
Some West Eugene Porkway proponents said WEP was needed to get to the coast faster, yet the WEP would have ended over an hour’s drive from Florence.

ODOT’s 126 study says most 126 traffic is local, not going to the coast. Widening 126 would subsidize Veneta’s expansion.
In the 1980s, ODOT and Lane County planned to build 126 through the Oregon Country Fair. Before that construction, the main connection from Eugene to the coast went along Suttle Road (on the north side of the OCF property). Routing the new road through the fair would have damaged, displaced or destroyed the festival, then a goal of some of the County’s conservatives.

OCF managed to divert the expressway by documenting ancient Kalapuya archeological relics in the wrong of way.

The area around the 126 widening from Eugene to Veneta is as archeologically significant as the OCF property.

Highway departments are the largest employers of archeologists in the United States because of federal laws that try to protect, or at least document, significant sites.