

Will a streetcar from Portland to Lake Oswego cost \$458 million?

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

Slogging through the suddenly cost-sensitive alternatives before them, a Citizen Advisory Committee studying the proposed Lake Oswego to Portland transit project seemed last month to have agreed on one thing: doing nothing is not a viable option.

Under study since 2007, and a focus of debate among the affected South Portland, Dunthorpe and Lake Oswego communities, the proposed transit project suddenly received wider attention last month with the publication of the required Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

This showed the construction costs of the two options now under consideration: an "enhanced bus" route for \$51.1 million, or an extension of the Portland Streetcar route from its current terminus on Southwest Lowell Street for anywhere from \$379.1 to \$458 million.

So stated, for many, including some local editors, the choice was a no-brainer. Streetcar advocates claimed this didn't tell the whole story.

For one thing, the streetcar price tag, compiled for the sake of the Federal Transit Administration (from

whom Metro hopes to obtain 60 percent of project funding), includes the cost of the old Willamette Shore Rail Line right of way, valued at \$95 to \$97 million, which is already publicly owned.

The line was acquired in 1988 for \$2 million. If the FTA agrees to provide 60 percent of the funding, as Metro will request, the cost to the region will be between \$57 and \$86 million.

Further, as consultant Doug Obletz told the CAC, the streetcar would cost just \$1.25 million more to operate than current buses, compared to \$2.79 more for the enhanced bus.

"TriMet is strapped for operating dollars, and here the cost is low compared to many projects," he said.

For streetcar advocates, the biggest bonuses are ridership and economic stimulus. A streetcar on this route is expected to increase transit ridership by 1.18 to 1.28 million more trips per year, depending on the alignment used, compared to 730,000 for the enhanced bus.

As Beverly Bookin, a consultant representing the John's Landing Owners Association, said, "In neighborhoods that have streetcar service, property values are increasing vis-à-vis those that don't. People are less likely to invest in property that has transit service that can disappear at the whim of a transit agency."

For some Lake Oswego critics this is their point: the service will bring more urbanization than they want. One recent e-mail claimed completion of the route would result in development "equal to 17 Washington Squares."

Obletz said such critics were using faulty figures; under existing zoning the maximum possible buildout in affected parts of the suburb would be about 11 million square feet, not 30 million as advertised.

Metro's Jamie Snook commented, "Rarely is any land developed to maximum potential. Obletz added, "The city of Lake Oswego gets to decide its development potential, the streetcar doesn't dictate it."

Is Metro safe in assuming the feds will pay for 60 percent of the project? Critics pointed to the \$1.5 billion Portland to Milwaukie light rail line, where the FTA is offering only 50 percent and project backers have had to scramble to find the rest.

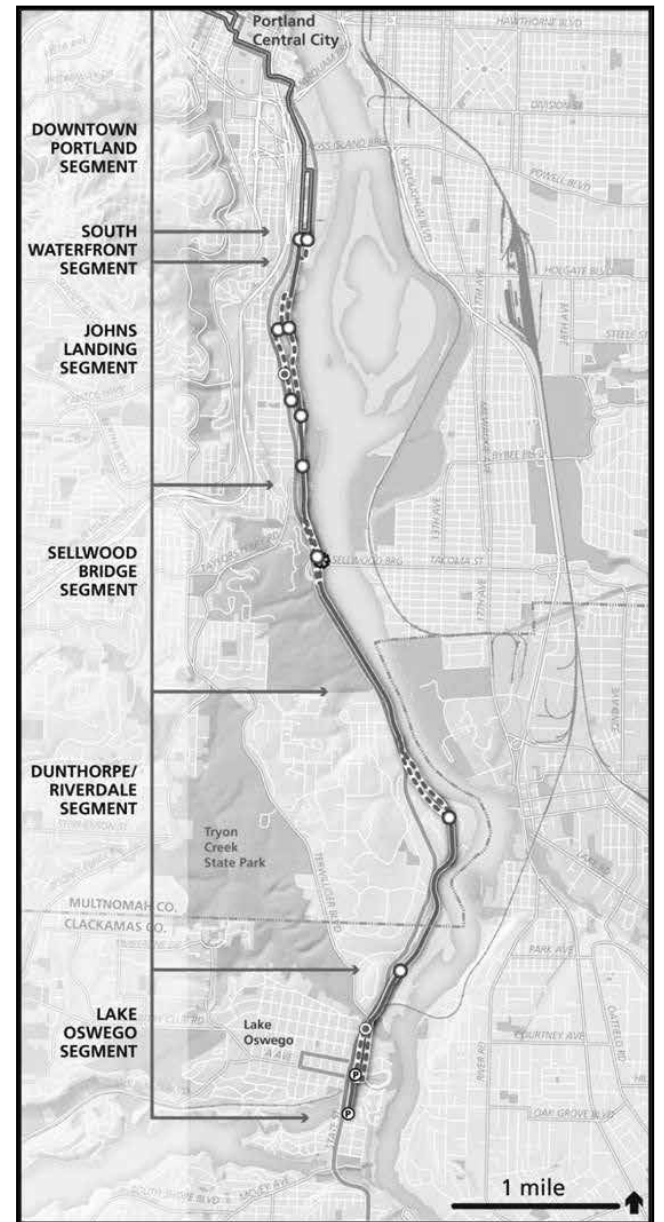
Obletz said the FTA is "moving toward 50 percent for very large projects. Streetcars are another matter. Right now there's no guidance this won't get 50 percent."

TriMet planner Joe Recker added, "There are no other (streetcar) projects that asked for 60 percent funding and didn't get it." Obletz did concede that until a deal is finalized, local funds spent on the project in the expectation of re-imbursement are "at risk."

Most of the CAC testimony last month called for removing the No Build option, which the FTA requires as part of the evaluation, from the table. Developer and Streetcar Board member Vern Rifer said, "No Build is an attempt to pretend that the present and the future are not true. There's a desire of people and companies to be near services and transit. Those cities that are successful are accommodating that need. Those that don't, like Las Vegas and Phoenix, are suffering and will continue to do so."

Former Portland transportation planner Matt Brown, now representing Lake Oswego interests, called No Build "the head in the sand option. It pretends the Macadam corridor works fine today, and that future demand can be easily accommodated with existing service."

CAC chair Ellie McPeak said, "No Build serves current bus users just fine, or they wouldn't be using it. It doesn't speed the journey, so those seeking faster service won't ride."



Portland Streetcar stops at Gibbs Street in the South Waterfront neighborhood. (flickr file photo courtesy of pchurch)

The streetcar will make the Lake Oswego to downtown an estimated 10 minutes faster than existing bus service.

Andrew Franklin said he favored No Build "because it's the only option that supports transit in my neighborhood." To this Obletz responded, "The committee should keep in mind that if an additional stop is needed, it should certainly be brought forward."

Lydia Lipman argued that the streetcar route is simply an attempt to justify the purchase of the Willamette Shore right of way. "If we didn't have the right of way, this is the last place we'd be looking at a streetcar route," she said.

Three citizens spoke, including newly elected Lake Oswego City Councilman Jeff Goodman, all critical of the streetcar route.

The CAC will take up the streetcar versus enhanced bus issue at its next meeting, 5 p.m. January 11, at a location unavailable at press time. They are expected to make their final recommendations on February 8.

For South Portland residents and businesses the big question is, assuming a streetcar is chosen, exactly what route should it take?

Transportation planners favor using as much of the Willamette Shore route as possible, since this would be the cheapest and fastest.

The South Portland Neighborhood Association and Business Association would prefer it to use Southwest Macadam Avenue in their part of town. This, they argue, would have the least impact on existing homes and the most beneficial economic impact on potential future development.

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