

# PBOT budget shortfall puts infrastructure, safety at risk

BY MARGAUX MENNESSON  
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST

**C**rumbling bridges. Unfilled potholes. Restricted emergency vehicle access. Bike lanes filled with debris. Sidewalks in disrepair.

These are some of the conditions we can expect to see more of when the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) cuts services and lays off employees to account for a \$16 million shortfall in revenue forecasts.

The budget shortfall is a direct result of our transportation funding structure's overreliance on gas tax revenue. Revenue from the gas tax — the state's single largest source of transportation funding — has fallen far short of expectations for the past five years, forcing budget analysts to revise expectations for years to come.

The city saw the steepest drop in 2009, at the height of the recession. High unemployment means fewer people are driving. More households are doing whatever they can to reduce expenditures and save money. People are registering fewer vehicles, driving fewer miles, purchasing more fuel-efficient vehicles and, increasingly, turning to alternative transportation like public transit, biking and walking.

While these figures point to some positive and lasting changes in our individual

transportation habits, they also create an alarming crisis for a transportation bureau that relied too much on an unstable funding stream.

In 2009, the Oregon state legislature approved a measure to raise the gas tax by six cents per gallon. The City of Portland has attempted to increase revenue through parking fees, extending pay-to-park hours to 7 p.m. and on Sundays. But these efforts haven't come close to making up for the losses.

City and state governments say they have few options in the face of dried-up funding sources. PBOT says that filling these gaps "will require that cuts be permanent and ongoing, as opposed to one-time spending cuts that expire once revenues rebound — that will fundamentally restructure the organization."

The union representing a portion of PBOT employees, Laborer's Local 483, warns that "the city's backlog in road maintenance will increase, eroding the condition of our roads, sidewalks and bridges."

Will our leaders sacrifice safety and basic infrastructure on our city streets and neighborhood sidewalks, while they continue to pursue the \$4 billion, regressive, auto-centric Columbia River Crossing project that has already cost the public over \$100 million? Or will they work harder to come up with a mix of strategies that puts our region in a stronger position for the next generation of Oregonians?

That's the challenge facing the city's Budget Advisory Committee, the stakeholder group tasked with discussing

permanent cuts and layoffs to help PBOT fill the holes without cutting essential services that keep us safe on the roads today and prepare us for the future of transportation.

The community needs leaders to prioritize projects that make our roads safe for everyone, increase access to affordable transportation choices, and connect people to jobs, services and neighborhoods.

Last year, 15 people were killed while walking on our roads — a 36 percent jump from previous years. Three bicyclists were killed in a two-week period in the Metro area this summer, after zero bicycle fatalities last year. The number of serious or fatal crashes involving people walking and biking is on the rise, even while the total number of traffic fatalities is declining.

Leaving safety needs unaddressed shifts the burden onto the public, with an estimated \$6 million cost in health care and lost wages for every traffic fatality in the Portland-Metro area.

Recently, the Oregonian reported that 58 miles of major city streets lack sidewalks on either side. Future cuts to public transit service will likely impact those neighborhoods with the most dangerous streets for walking. Yet already, in anticipation of further cuts, the bureau has postponed \$3.2 million in new sidewalk construction that was supposed to go toward improving those high-crash neighborhoods.

We need to find more stable sources of revenue. And we need to prioritize smart, cost-effective, sustainable transportation projects that keep our roads safe and our community healthy.



## HEALTHY STREETBEAT

Bicycle  
Transportation  
Alliance

Healthy Streetbeat is a monthly column for Street Roots written by the Bicycle Transportation Alliance (BTA). Our contributors are Rob Sadowsky, executive director, and Margaux Mennesson, communications director.

## About Jonah, From a Dream

By Debra Knauft

I hold this picture close  
When I am at cliff's edge,  
When the door I thought  
Was closed, opens.

I carry this dream of you  
Jumping from a high place  
Landing easily on your feet  
Right side up, as if you were  
Your own parachute

The last time I had dinner  
With you and your sister  
Every cell in your thick, earthly body  
From your eyebrows to your toes  
Was in the appleseed prayer  
We sang thanks for the food  
We were about to eat.

The earth is good to me  
And as I thank the earth  
For giving me the things I need  
The sun and the rain and the appleseed  
And the earth is good to me.

# There is hope yet — if you're a possibilist

BY TOM WATSON  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

**P**olarization and fear seem to have a stranglehold on American society today, making social, political and environmental change nearly impossible. How can we ever agree on anything?

If you think we can think our way out of this mess, Frances Moore Lappé offers a potential escape route in her new book, "EcoMind." She tells us that environmental transformation can only occur if we throw out our old ideas and strategies and create a new roadmap in our minds.

**EcoMind:  
Changing the  
Way We Think, to  
Create the World  
We Want** by  
Frances Moore  
Lappé

Her style may, at times, be a little New Age for some tastes, but there's no denying that Lappé is an innovative, deep thinker and a strong writer. In 1971, her influential "Diet for a Small Planet" became an international bestseller. She has written 16 other books, and currently heads the nonprofit Small Planet Institute with her daughter Anna Lappé.

The premise of "EcoMind" is that our current efforts to make real environmental changes are mostly rendered impotent because of seven "thought traps." In consecutive chapters Lappé describes these views that are widely held by environmentalists, and then dismantles them:

1. No-growth is the answer.
2. Consumer society is the problem.
3. We've hit the limits of a finite Earth.
4. We must overcome human nature to save the planet.
5. We have to override humanity's natural

resistance to rules.

6. Humans have lost the connection to nature.

7. It's too late.

Although in less skilled hands it could seem forced and preachy, this framework actually serves to make the book a compelling read. Lappé provides illuminating real-world examples as she meticulously makes her case.

To show that we haven't "lost the connection to nature," for instance, she describes the urban food-growing movement and the efforts of a British town north of London called Todmorden (which Lappé unfortunately misspells as "Todmorton"). Marketing itself as the "Incredible Edible Todmorden," this community has planted vegetables, herbs and fruit trees everywhere, from the lawns of homes and businesses to the cemetery to the train platform, and many of these gardens are available for free public picking.

In another chapter, calling B.S. on the idea that we must overcome human nature and that "humans don't like change," Lappé offers this eloquent rebuttal: "We do typically experience change in part as loss, but a striking feature of our species is our attraction to the new. Virtually from birth, humans are learners, testers, explorers."

But what really sets this book apart is the way Lappé connects environmental change with social and political change. The environmental crisis is "a crisis of democracy itself," she writes, and the solution lies in "removing the power of concentrated wealth from public decision making."

One way to achieve this, she says, is through public campaign financing, which Arizona, Maine and Connecticut have as an option for state elections. Lappé describes how Maine waitress Deb Simpson — a single mom and domestic abuse survivor — ran for office in 2000 after she collected just \$5 each from 50 people and was then able to get on the ballot and access public funds.

She won and has served since then in the Maine House of Representatives and state Senate.

From that story Lappé immediately turns to an inspiring account of how the Maine Legislature passed the first state product stewardship law in the nation for old consumer electronics products such as computers and TVs. Even though "industry lobbyists mounted the biggest effort to defeat a law that Mainers had ever seen," this law took effect in 2006 and inspired more than 20 similar state laws, including the popular electronics recycling law in Washington. Under this program, known as E-Cycle Washington, individuals and small businesses now pay nothing to recycle a computer or TV because the electronics industry is required to provide funding for those recycling costs.

When she gets revved up about the political inertia that also stalls environmental and social progress, Lappé is at her best. Three conditions have been shown over America's history to elicit the worst in us, she says: extreme power inequalities, secrecy (she gives the example of the financial industry operating without public oversight), and scapegoating. That's why the solution can be found in the dispersion of power, transparency and mutual accountability, she asserts.

This book was published months before Occupy Wall Street, and the vocal protests of the 99 percent, but it almost seems as if Lappé predicted that movement. The recent surges toward democracy in the Middle East also mesh well with her assessment of social, political and environmental problems and solutions.

We don't even have to be optimists, Lappé writes. She describes herself instead as a "possibilist," and that's what we should all strive to be. Change is possible, and we can make it happen.

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