

Relying on transit, two feet and two wheels in the suburbs

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The school district reporting the most homeless students in Oregon isn't Portland Public, Reynolds or Gresham-Barlow. It's Beaverton.

Washington County is known as the economic engine of the state, with large companies, large subdivisions and large cars. Those days might be behind us now though, as the economy stagnates while businesses and individuals shift toward the vibrancy, health, ease and livability that can be found in Portland's central neighborhoods.

The young, the old and everyone in between are now driving less and spending less. A car-free, carefree lifestyle is available to those who can afford Pearl District rents or a new condo on North Williams Avenue. A car-free but far more challenging path faces the growing number of families without cars in Beaverton, Aloha-Reedville, Forest Grove and throughout Washington County.

The growth of transit in our western suburbs, kick-started in the 1990s by the opening of the Westside MAX (now known as the Blue Line), made it possible to live without a car in the suburbs. But it didn't make it easy. Nike and Intel commuters have access to light rail, bike share and employer shuttles to transport them from home to work and back. Each station has sidewalks, platforms, shelters, system maps, benches and bike parking.

Line 57 is also a crucial public transit route in Washington County. It follows the Tualatin Valley (TV) Highway all the way from downtown Beaverton to downtown Forest Grove and is one of the top 10 busiest bus lines in the TriMet system. If you want to catch an eastbound bus in the unincorporated community of Aloha-Reedville, just west of Beaverton, you may be waiting on the gravel shoulder of a five-lane highway with no sidewalk, no street lighting and nothing but a thin stripe of paint between you and thousands of cars and trucks traveling upwards of 45 miles

per hour. To get to this bus stop you may have had to sprint across this five-lane speedway, because the nearest signaled crossing is more than a half mile away. Maybe you chose instead to bike down a busy north-south road with no bike lanes in order to avoid a harrowing crossing. If the two bike racks on the bus are full when it pulls up, you scramble to lock your bike to the bus stop post, the only option in sight. Possibly you are a student at Aloha High School? It doesn't matter, because you don't have a free bus pass like students in Portland.

TV Highway is currently the deadliest road in our region for people biking and walking. Since 2008, more people have died while traveling on foot or bike there than on Powell and Barbur boulevards combined.

Fixing TV Highway requires a mix of simple, cheap changes (such as narrowing travel lanes and lowering the speed limit) as well as grander ones, like the provision of a protected bikeway or trail throughout the length of the highway. How to invest in the highway without displacing those who most rely on that new ADA-accessible sidewalk or bus is a top concern. At a recent community meeting in Aloha, one member requested the group start working on affordable housing. Long-time Aloha resident and mobile home advocate Eric Squires responded, "We are affordable housing."

There is no question that this region needs to invest in TV Highway to improve safety for all road users and enhance livability in the neighborhoods and business districts that straddle it. These neighborhoods provide a home for long-time residents hoping to age in place, young families pushed out of Portland by rising rents, farm workers growing and harvesting food for the whole region and recruits from around the world transforming the tech and apparel industries. Residents such as Kody Harris, the executive assistant of the Aloha Business Association, want "Bikes, beer, and brews" in these neighborhoods just like many Portland residents.

But today, neighborhoods like Aloha are plagued by a lack of sidewalks, streetlights,

safe crossings and community gathering places that are welcoming and reflective of the increasing diversity of Washington County.

Four years ago, Washington County started to update the transportation plans for Aloha-Reedville, an unincorporated community of 50,000 people that stretches across TV Highway between Beaverton and Hillsboro. The community spoke up, under the leadership of organizations like the Center for Intercultural Organizing, to say that the county could not look at transportation alone and could not do it without leadership from the increasingly diverse community.

The county listened. The three-year long Aloha-Reedville Study and Livable Community Plan was carried out with extensive engagement from diverse community organizations and resulted in, not just one, but six crucial and interconnected priorities: getting around safely, neighborhood quality, major roads, healthy and active living and supporting local business. This type of broad, open lens and investment in community engagement created a plan that is relevant, equitable and smart. It is a hopeful and achievable vision of livable, safe, affordable communities in the suburbs. This is not a pipe dream but a necessity as our region grows in numbers, popularity and price.

Fixing TV Highway, Powell-Division and similar corridors won't take a miracle. These corridors pose daily threats to the people. For some of our region's most disadvantaged community members, they also serve as home. To address the threat without displacing the home requires those with the most at stake to hold true power in the process: nothing more, nothing less.

About this series

This commentary is part of a series that looks at the intersection of transportation and poverty in Portland's metropolitan area. It examines where we are and where we might be going and poses questions for the future of our communities.



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