



The new I-5 Beltline freeway interchange costing more than \$115 million was never voted on by the Eugene City Council or public and will increase global warming pollution

More Freeways

Our local response to global warming

By Alan Pittman

Two years ago, Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy traveled to Salt Lake City to talk about climate change.

With polar bears in danger of drowning and threats of floods and droughts from global warming brought on by pollution and the Bush administration failing to act, Piercy and 45 other U.S. mayors signed on to the Kyoto Protocol's call to reduce greenhouse gasses to 7 percent below 1990 levels by 2012.

"The federal government is not taking the initiative that it needs to on this issue, and time is running out," Piercy told *EW* in 2005. "This is a great opportunity for Eugene to make a difference in the ways that we can."

But last month Piercy cast the deciding vote for a massive regional freeway plan that takes a big step back from efforts to reduce driving and will dramatically increase global warming pollution locally.

The Metropolitan Policy Committee (MPC) voted Nov. 8 to approve a half-billion-dollar Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) focused largely on building more and more freeways to promote urban sprawl with more and more traffic belching out carbon dioxide, the leading cause of global warming.

"This RTP goes in exactly the opposite direction of where we need to go," said Friends of Eugene President Kevin Matthews.

Under the RTP, per capita driving will increase 13 percent by 2031. The plan includes: \$90 million for two new freeway interchanges for Highway 126 to serve sprawl in east Springfield; a \$10 million new freeway to serve proposed growth boundary sprawl in far southeastern Springfield; \$115 million for freeway interchange work to serve sprawl in the Gateway Mall/Riverbend area; a new \$22 million freeway interchange for Coburg; and more than \$60 million to increase freeway capacity on Beltline Highway on the edge of Eugene.

"We face a world of reduced funding, finite resources and climate change, and our regional planning must reflect these new realities," Piercy said in a press release after the vote. But Piercy said that the city can address these new realities later as it updates TransPlan, the region's long-range transportation land use planning document.

The last time TransPlan was updated, it took a decade. Piercy did not respond to requests for an interview. Instead, the mayor sent an email stating that she was "strongly in favor of aligning RTP and TransPlan as soon as possible" and wanted reduced carbon emissions and more public involvement in MPC. Piercy's votes have increasingly disappointed local environmentalists. Last week she broke a tie vote against prioritizing new regulations to protect water quality.

Zako said Piercy's vote "surprised" environmentalists who thought she would vote against the freeways.

With the MPC vote, Piercy could have cast the deciding vote to change or defeat the freeway plan. The body requires at least one vote from Eugene to pass a measure. Eugene Councilor Alan Zelenka, the other Eugene member of the MPC, voted against the freeway plan as did County Commissioner Peter Sorenson.

Sorenson said he objects that the little-known MPC makes such "powerful" decisions involving hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayer money with so little public involvement. "It's quite exclusive," Sorenson said of the meeting in the Wells Fargo bank building downtown. "That's the whole point; it's outside of public view."

Councilor Zelenka said his vote also reflected concerns about inadequate public involvement.

Staff at the Lane Council of Governments (LCOG), an obscure government agency not directly accountable to voters and that largely operates beyond public scrutiny, wrote the freeway plans, which were approved by the MPC without amendment.

Rob Zako, a transportation advocate with 1000 Friends of Oregon, said LCOG's MPC has seized tremendous power over local land use planning, contrary to state law.

Transportation decisions "drive land use decisions," Zako wrote to LCOG. State regulations require adequate transportation before big new developments can be approved. "Thus, the new PeaceHealth hospital in Springfield was contingent on the Interstate-5/Beltline project; the McKenzie-Willamette hospital in Eugene is contingent on improvements at Beltline and Delta Highway," Zako wrote. LCOG/MPC "has the authority to decide which transportation projects are 'reasonably likely' to be built, hence where new developments can be approved contingent on those projects."

Zako said the freeway plans do not follow locally adopted land use plans for where and how to grow and were never vetted with public hearings before city councils. Instead of determining urban growth plans with freeway plans, LCOG/MPC should be following them, Zako wrote.

State land use regulators also expressed dissatisfaction with the plan. A letter from Robert Cortright of the Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development notes that the RTP reverses the previous TransPlan's calls for reducing dependence on driving. Noting that the plan adds more freeway interchanges while falling 50 percent short of previous targets for public transit, DLCD wrote: "In rough terms, the 2031 RTP estimates the region will make half the progress in twice the time."

LCOG staff dismissed Zako and DLCD's comments and denied that they were engaged in land use planning. But the plan does acknowledge that "reliance on more and bigger roadways to meet the transportation demand is shortsighted. ... Experience from cities all over the world suggests that building roads encourages more people to use cars, thereby perpetuating the transportation challenges."

With all the additional car use the plan envisions, the plan will also perpetuate climate challenges. More than half (52 percent) of Eugene's global warming pollution comes from driving, according to a July city of Eugene study.

Although considerable local attention has focused on green building to reduce heating and lighting energy, residential electricity use represents only 3 percent of the local contribution to global warming, according to the study. That's because almost all local electricity is produced by hydropower which doesn't cause air pollution.

With increased driving largely driving the increase, Eugene greenhouse gas pollution in 2020 will be two thirds higher than in 1990, the city estimates under current trends. Compare that to the Kyoto treaty the mayor signed on to, which calls for a 7 percent reduction from 1990 levels by 2012.

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— Rob Zako, 1000 Friends of Oregon

Recognizing the "serious threat" to Oregon's economy, environment and human health that global warming represents, the state Legislature passed HB 3543 this year setting greenhouse gas reduction goals of 10 percent below 1990 levels by 2020.

Friends of Eugene wrote that the bill and the federal Clean Air Act require LCOG to consider global warming in drafting the RTP, but LCOG dismissed the claim and refused to even do an accounting of the greenhouse pollution increase from its plan. "Obviously, here locally, LCOG doesn't get it yet," Zako said.

The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) has also not changed its push for massive new freeway projects throughout the state in response to state policy change around global warming. "I think the memo never got to them," Sorenson said.

Zako said he hasn't given up hope. Gov. Ted Kulongoski recently appointed a more environmental chairperson for ODOT, he said. The local freeway plan could also be changed over the next several years if Eugene officials push for a more environmentally friendly TransPlan, he added.

But Matthews of Friends of Eugene said the rubber needs to meet the road when it comes to global warming and local transportation plans. With scientists saying global warming damage now will take decades to slowly reverse, "every year that we sit on our butts right now costs us a generation at the other end, a generation of suffering," Matthews said. "We're really hurting our children's children."

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