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viewpoint BY MARK ROBINOWITZ

Full Speed Ahead

Lane County transportation update

Lane County's transportation plans are similar to those nearly everywhere else in the U.S. as we pass peak oil – full speed ahead on road expansions plus a sideshow of public transit upgrades.

In two decades of freeway fighting, I have been unable to find a single community in our country that has canceled any highway expansion plan due to the end of cheap oil and the start of climate chaos.

Lane County's main transportation project under way is widening I-5 via the new, wider Willamette River bridges. Widening at the McKenzie River and the Highway 58 interchange were recently completed. The next focus will be the 30th Avenue interchange near LCC. Widening I-5 at 30th will require moving the frontage roads which may displace businesses, including Sequential Biofuels.

ODOT is doing two major highway expansion studies in Lane County. The bigger effort would expand Beltline between River and Coburg Roads, another is to make Highway 126 six lanes in Springfield.

Beltline is the county's busiest road, but mitigating safety concerns at the Delta interchange doesn't require expansion to 11 lanes (one of the options drawn up for the study). A simple, cheap "low build" ramp change at Beltline/Delta would solve the worst "weaving" problem, but politicians and bureaucrats are not promoting cost effective solutions. The recently expanded Beltline/I-5 interchange is far larger than needed to mitigate safety problems. It was supersized to subsidize development, not solve traffic hazards.

Widening I-5, Beltline, 126 and similar projects are federal decisions made by the Federal Highway Administration, they are not local decisions. However, under Federal law, the local governments approve wish lists that the state and feds then work to approve and implement. All of the local governments in the Lane Council of Governments have endorsed these highway plans at the Metropolitan Policy Committee meetings – almost entirely without meaningful public awareness or scrutiny. One example: I was the only member of the public to speak at a recent LCOG MPC public hearing on updating the Regional Transportation Plan.

In November 2008, the Governor's Transportation Vision Committee report called for \$18 billion in new and expanded ODOT highways, including \$1 billion in projects for Eugene and Springfield. There were three environmental groups invited to participate in this committee, but that didn't stop the report from recommending lots of road widenings and new bypasses.

In December 2010, outgoing Gov. Kulongoski's administration released the Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Sunrise Freeway, a billion dollar plus new interstate highway in Clackamas County. Sunrise Freeway and Sunrise Parkway would be the transportation artery for the new sprawlville of Damascus, Oregon's newest city. This approval also includes massive expansion to I-205 near the Sunrise terminus – 205 would become Oregon's widest road if this is built. I am unaware of any organized environmentalist or community opposition to this new freeway. Plans are also accelerating for the Newberg Dundee Bypass, which would pave over farmland.

I asked Rep. Earl Blumenauer if he supported federal funding for Sunrise Freeway after his March 4 keynote speech to the Public Interest Environmental Law Conference. He replied it was oversized and he supports building a so-called "parkway" on the route, although there's no environmental difference between the designs. Blumenauer is a Portland Democrat who champions bicycle lanes, so-called Smart Growth and now a so-called Parkway. Peak Oil means we need transportation triage to prioritize resources on the energy downslope.

The only local transport project that has any public attention is the West Eugene Bus Rapid Transit proposal. Both sides of this debate have valid points. We certainly need better public transit, but it's also true that this BRT line has severe design flaws and is overpriced.

State law requires transportation projects to be integrated with land use plans but the West Eugene BRT did not include any efforts to stop approvals of big box stores and other car centric designs. Worse, it is using the same flawed traffic models that claimed the West Eugene Parkway would be needed because traffic levels are going to continue to worsen. But traffic levels have peaked and plateaued since gasoline prices rose.

On the downslope of peak oil it will be difficult to maintain existing roads and bus transit service. Local governments know about these issues but refuse to include them in their plans.

Mark Robinowitz was a "road scholar" who documented WEP's legal problems, details at www.sustaineugene.org Peak oil and peak traffic could be used to block federal highway expansions, see www.road-scholar.org

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