

Making Connections

Interstate Max cements lasting ties with minority businesses and community

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"Tri-met has people working for you," Burrell explains, "but they can't make people hire you."

But Watts is pleased with the overall results the growing transit company has accomplished on the project.

"It's been a very unique experience because Tri Met has walked its talk," he says. "This is one of the few projects where the community has had the opportunity to participate from the very beginning."

A continued willingness to work with, not against community interests, keeps the project moving ahead of schedule. A revamping of the original layout of the rail design has produced no business or home condemnations.

When plans were made to put in a sub-station directly on the alignment, neighbors protested. The presence of the station, they argued, would make it difficult to develop the block for any other purpose. In response, Tri-Met looked long and hard before finally securing a piece of Oregon Department of Transportation property that the community felt worked better.

"From the very beginning, we were telling the community you're going to be a partner in this," Watts said.

Though many of the businesses located along Interstate Ave. agree that construction of the light rail line has significantly affected business, Tri-Met has taken notable strides at working to offset losses. "The question is, What can we do to be able to mitigate it?"

James Dixon of Dixon's Rib Pit at 5804 N. Interstate Ave. says the drop in business since construction started has been significant.

Dixon's seen traffic delays, limited access, and dust and dirt all drive away potential customers.

"Tri-Met couldn't have anticipated the impact this would have on business," says Dixon.

Still, Dixon admits that Tri-Met has been a "cooperative partner" providing signage, fliers, and even a redesigned menu.

When parking became an issue out front, Tri-Met cleared a space behind his restaurant, paved it for parking and then rented it from him for several months.

All in all, the effort has helped offset losses.



James Dixon of Dixon's Rib Pit (left), meets with Tri-Met General Manager Fred Hansen, outside Dixon's north Interstate restaurant. Dixon calls Hansen and his transit agency a cooperative partner in helping make his business a success.

PHOTO BY DAVID PLECHL/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

"I don't want to bad-mouth Tri-Met," says Dixon. They did what they could do...They did as much for me as I asked."

"We wanted to make sure the community we went through would benefit from construction as well," Hansen explains. "We focused on individual businesses."

One hairdresser along the Interstate corridor was so small, she didn't even have a bank account. To minimize impact, Tri-Met work crews scheduled all sidewalk work on Monday, the one day a week she was closed.

What all this outreach amounts to is a transit system that fits with the people it serves.

The model Tri-Met has created is attracting a lot of attention. Hansen says representatives from transit systems across the country

are coming to Portland "every 10 days" just to see what Tri-Met is doing right.

What has made this project different? For Bruce Watts, it all goes back to one reason: Fred Hansen.

Watts says Hansen recognized that the community had been ignored or left out of other projects.

"Fred has demonstrated the will to make Tri-Met a completely different kind of transit agency," says

Watts.

In order to ensure the same commitment to community interests on future projects, Hansen has assigned Watts to a totally new agency.

"We're going to make sure everything we do is permeated with this concept," explains Watts. "Are we being equitable? Do we have all of the community at the table?"

Will Interstate Max be the end

of the line? "Absolutely not," says the forward thinking Hansen.

Projected ridership numbers estimate that by 2020, 18,000 commuters will use Interstate Max daily. If the line reaches Vancouver, that number is expected to double. It is an incentive and a duty Hansen just can't ignore.

"When we go to Vancouver," he says, "it's not a question of if."

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