



The Honorable Sean Duffy  
Secretary

U.S Department of Transportation  
1200 New Jersey Ave. SE  
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy,

Your recent decision to launch a federal review of California's high-speed rail project—billions over budget and years behind schedule—is a crucial step toward accountability. But there is one rail project farther north that also needs a close and objective federal review.

In particular, the proposed light rail addition to the replacement Interstate 5 Columbia River bridge connecting Washington State to Oregon. No one opposes the need for a new bridge. What we in several Southwest Washington cities have opposed for over a decade is the insistence on including Portland's light rail at a cost of at least \$2 billion, taking up a lane that could be better used for existing buses and carpools.

Under previous administrations, light rail proposals were treated as sacred cows—rarely questioned or subjected to rigorous analysis. The assumption was that light rail would reduce greenhouse gases, increase public transportation use, and justify its enormous cost. But recent data from Seattle and Portland calls those assumptions into question. Transportation experts at the highly regarded, non-partisan Washington Policy Center indicate that light rail does not pass a serious cost-benefit analysis. In reality, it may discourage emerging transportation technologies that are more cost-effective, safer, and better for the environment.

First, the concrete used in light rail construction emits so much carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that it will take decades—if ever—for its operations to offset the environmental impact. Meanwhile, hybrid and electric vehicle technologies have advanced

far beyond the outdated models used in early studies. Second, initial projections estimated that light rail would increase overall public transit use by a mere 1%, but even that has proven inaccurate. Since COVID, public transit ridership has dropped significantly, and shifting work patterns have hit Seattle and Portland especially hard. Seattle's public transit boardings per service hour in 2023 were only about half of what they were in the 1990s. Likewise, small and large businesses are leaving Portland in droves. Portland now has the highest office vacancy rate in the entire country.

Unlike buses or carpools, light rail is inflexible—more accurately described as "fixed rail." A century ago, Seattle's Interurban rail system became obsolete with the rise of buses and automobiles, a lesson that light rail advocates in Southwest Washington have forgotten.

Now is the time for the federal government to conduct a serious and rigorous cost-benefit analysis before committing billions of federal dollars to fixed rail. Independent experts, who have no financial stake in the outcome, should be enlisted to ensure an objective review.

It is not too late to reconsider light rail on the Columbia River bridge. Former U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, who played a role in the first iteration of this project before it collapsed in 2014 over concerns about light rail and tolling, recently noted that the federal government still has the power to reevaluate pending grants. "Since there's no design, no environmental analysis, these can't be finally obligated," DeFazio said. That means funding can still be pulled before taxpayers are locked into a costly mistake.

One thing we have learned from the California and Seattle experiences is that planners have consistently underestimated the true costs of light rail, which continue to rise by billions. Meanwhile, past failures are excused, and flawed predictions are rationalized. It's time for an honest review before taxpayers are asked to foot the bill for yet another transportation boondoggle.

Sincerely,

Leslie Lewallen

Camas City Councilor & Former Candidate for  
Washington's Third Congressional District