

Let's Talk Transit Response Summary

On November 9th, Lane Transit District and several partners hosted a town hall forum to discuss the role of transit in the Eugene-Springfield community. With presentations from several speakers, including John English from the Utah Transit Authority and Congressman Peter DeFazio, the audience was asked to discuss at their tables what aspects of transit are important to them.

In general, respondents seemed to appreciate the forum and wanted similar future events. Below is a summary of the comments, divided into eight different topic areas listed from most commonly cited to least. As is evident below, many of these topics have significant overlap, but this document attempts to capture them separately for the sake of clarity. After these topic areas is an extra "Other Comments" section for some notable, though less prevalent, responses. Lastly, at the end of this summary are ideas that were presented on how to move forward with this important discussion.

Equity

The most commonly cited reason transit is important to the community was that it provides for greater equity. This equity aspect specifically related to three different areas: Income, age and ability, and the rural/urban divide.

It was noted that transit was originally intended as a social service to provide mobility options to those unable to drive a car. As one respondent put it, transit today "meets a social objective of providing mobility to the poor and disabled." Another commented that transit is "vitaly important for those without the means for personal transportation or who choose not to invest in an auto." Many commented that transit provides mobility for a variety of lower-income users, such as those who are homeless or the area's large student population. One respondent captured it well when she wrote, "LTD's roots are in social service. There's an important transition under way from assisting the disempowered to empowering the entire population by giving all of us more transportation choices."

Age and ability considerations were also an important factor in the value of transit. As one person noted, "The aging population and those with disabilities rely on public transit for access and reducing isolation." Of particular concern for many was that as the population in the community grows older, there will be an even greater need for transit. A crucial role that transit serves is to give mobility to residents of varying ability levels.

Finally, several respondents noted urban/rural equity issues. One person noted that transit could play an important role in "connecting rural and outlying communities to the urban center and transportation hubs (Amtrak, Eugene airport)." Rural transit routes can allow for the transportation disadvantaged to access the services provided within urban limits.

Economic Development

The next most-cited way in which transit is important to the community was its value as an economic development tool. One person wrote, "Public transit reduces the amount of money that leaks out of

our economy as a result of heavy dependence on the private automobile (petroleum, automobiles, insurance, etc. are purchased from out-of-state or out of country). Transit is essential for economic development.” Many commented that transit benefits the community by allowing residents to reduce their household expenses on transportation, thus allowing for more purchases at local businesses.

Others emphasized the ability of transit to increase land values and spur development along new lines. One respondent noted, “It’s an asset to our community in bringing both business and quality of life investments into our community, and furthers investment in downtown mixed-use redevelopment.” Another commented that fixed transportation infrastructure, like bus rapid transit, is far more effective in bringing such investments than regular bus service.

Efficiency and Mobility

Along with increasing accessibility to the transportation disadvantaged, there was a general sense that transit increases mobility for all users of the transportation system. One respondent noted that, “Transit is important because we cannot maintain our current path of congestion,” while another wrote, “Transit provides reliable mobility for both people dependent on transportation and for a growing community.”

Several respondents also referenced overall mobility of goods, commenting, “More people on transit means less congestion for truck drivers to pick up and deliver goods, increasing efficiency.” In general the perception for many was that transit is an important part of maximizing the capacity of the existing road system, and thus generates benefits for the entire community. One respondent put it well, writing, “We all benefit – even those who don’t use public transit.”

Land Use

Transit’s relationship to land use followed economic development in how often it was cited. Many commented that transit made compact urban development possible. For example, one person wrote, “The community has talked for years about realizing the multiple benefits of compact urban growth. Improved transit systems will help us get there.” Another noted, “It provides people a means to travel and be connected without reliance on the automobile, which creates a sustainable urban population that grows and densifies.” On the other hand, it was also recognized that transit is contingent upon density in order to function. Given the dual relationship, one respondent noted, “Carefully crafted transit planning is congruent with land use planning, and results in an urban environment where social justice is improved.”

Others went further in describing transit’s role in not only allowing for denser urban development, but also the resulting preservation of rural lands for agriculture or natural preserve purposes. “Public transit allows for more compact development which in turn helps preserve local resource land,” wrote one person, while another commented, “It allows dense mixed use development. People who live in multifamily housing generally need good transit. The resulting mixed use leads to a more compact urban form and lowers many other costs, too (street drainage, water, sewage, policing, fire, etc.); and it preserves rural land because we don’t need to expand.”

Environment

Environmental conservation was also cited as being an important aspect of transit. Several people indicated that there is an environmental benefit as a result of having fewer cars on the road, particularly in the context of global climate change. As one person put it, “Public transit is the single greatest means to reduce congestion, thereby reducing carbon emissions from stopped cars.”

Along with greenhouse gas emissions reductions, local environmental quality was also viewed as benefiting from transit. As one person commented, transit “creates a better environment – air quality, water quality, and greenhouse gas reductions.” Noise pollution, too, was pointed out as being mitigated by transit, presumably as a result of removing cars from the road.

The environmental benefit dovetailed with the economic development aspect as well. In many comments, reduced reliance on fossil fuels was paired with both reducing environmental impact and also keeping more money in the local economy. One respondent wrote, “There are both environmental benefits of fewer cars and benefits to the local economy from freeing up money that would otherwise be spent on gas.”

Community Cohesion

Less commonly cited than the above topics, but still noted by many, was the sense of community that is fostered through transit. One person wrote “Public transit is the ribbon that ties our community together,” while another noted, “[Transit] forces you to interact with the rest of your community.” The general sentiment was that single-occupant vehicle use can result in a fragmented community, whereas transit can bring people together. A few respondents went even further suggesting that transit should attempt to connect even more of Lane County’s population. One person wrote, “It should connect all the communities in the county. It is the solution to providing a functioning community in the face of expensive or non-available vehicle fuel.”

Transportation Options

Several people cited transit as contributing to a variety of transportation options, the implication being that having options is an inherent good. For example, one person wrote, “Transit provides choice – we need options for people to choose, including bus, EmX, car, bike, ped[estrian].” Another pointed out that through choices, a wider variety of residents are able to travel, commenting that “Good public transit adds to multi-modal choices and makes transportation accessible to more people.” This may be particularly true for travelers with different levels of ability, as noted by one respondent who wrote, “[Transit serves] to satisfy the need for options, to serve the growing population of elderly, disabled, and disadvantaged.”

Public Health

The final theme with a substantial number of comments was the way in which transit can support the health of residents in the community. Some pointed to the fact that using transit encourages walking and biking, which could increase physical activity. One person wrote, “It’s important to consider public

transit as one piece of how people make a trip. People don't just ride a bus and that's it—they get to transit somehow. These connections will be increasingly important. It's a big deal for the health and fitness of our community to invest in transit." Another person noted the benefit to public health resulting from less air pollution. This respondent noted, "[Transit] improves public health by decreasing air pollution from car exhaust and excessive pavement."

Other Comments

In addition to the above topics, there were a few other recurring comments regarding transit that bear mentioning. The first is light rail, which was mentioned several times as a potential option for future transit investments. Specifically, investing in light rail to connect outlying communities to Eugene/Springfield or building a line from Eugene to the airport was pointed to as a possibility.

The issue of transit to the airport was raised several times outside the context of light rail as well. One person commented that it can cost \$30 each way to travel to the airport, and another pointed out that using the airport as an EmX terminus on a line that runs along Highway 99W would be a very useful connector.

Along similar lines, many people commented that the creation of a multi-modal hub in downtown Eugene would be a logical next step. One person commented, "We need a multimodal transit hub. To have Amtrak, Greyhound and the LTD bus station blocks away from each other is inconvenient for users." Others noted that better integration of transit and bicycle/pedestrian amenities is necessary to allow people easy access to/from transit locations.

Finally, there were several comments focusing on EmX, and specifically the West Eugene EmX Expansion (WEEE) Project. There was basically an even split between general "pro-" and "anti-" EmX comments. However, some of the more specific comments dealing with EmX had to do with the process of its implementation. One person noted, "More science and concrete data should be used by non-political parties to plan EmX routes as opposed to the current and politically based decision making."

Others commented on the role of businesses in the planning process, one example being, "Are members of the business community along W. 11th on committees involved with EmX expansion? That would be key." Another person wrote, "LTD needs to have conversations with property owners and businesses to get support before implementation. Talk to the community and find ways to help businesses survive during construction."

Others were concerned about the cost of expanding the EmX system. One person commented, "Public transit is of course a good thing. It is not synonymous with EmX. We don't need to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to go faster." Another wrote, "We currently have the cart before the horse. We should start with funding and how to pay for it, and then go into the transportation lines." A few cited the Utah Transit Authority as a model, which indicated that a sales tax increase supported capital and operational expenses.

Moving Forward

When asked about how to move forward, the vast majority of respondents wrote that they hope to have more forums in which to discuss transit. One person wrote, “Continue town halls such as this one – larger, smaller, different places, different times. The town hall is a chance to share info and feedback. The eventual result is a higher level of shared knowledge in the community leading to more informed plans and decisions.”

Others were interested in determining a way to engage the WEEE opposition, several of whom were outside of the building holding “No Build” signs. One participant commented, “Too bad the opposition wasn’t inside, participating in the discussion. I don’t know how, but we need to keep at it, and with inclusive participation. Let’s hear all sides in a useful, productive forum.” For those who addressed this issue, there seemed to be consensus that a significant effort should be made to have all voices present for future discussions.

Lastly, some people expressed disappointment that the WEEE Project was not dealt with expressly during the event. One wrote, “I believe most people came in hope of discussing West 11th EmX, obviously the most contentious issue. The next step should be to have a public discussion specifically on the EmX West 11th Expansion.” Others wrote similar comments expressing a desire for more project-specific discussion at future forums.