

Proposed West Eugene Em-X Extension

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The Register Guard and even the Eugene Weekly have been characterizing all those opposed to the West Eugene Em-X proposed extension into West Eugene as anti-government Tea-Partiers. I am not at all one of those, and I consider myself knowledgeable about land use and transportation planning having lived in central Eugene for over 20 years, having previously lived in San Francisco for many years, having traveled on public transit in many of the world's greatest cities and having served as a representative on the Eugene/Springfield Metroplan Transplan Update in the 1990s. **I am opposed to the Em-X West Eugene extension** not just because of its unnecessary, pork-barrel dimensions, but because its construction would actually slow progress and become a major impediment to achieving the true goals of good public transit in our community.

The Bus Rapid Transit type of system

BRT with dedicated rights-of-way was actually designed to work in or between cities in parts of Australia where rights-of-way through private lands needed to be procured. That type of system cannot be inserted into an existing neighborhood (the area between the Downtown and Chambers Street) without extreme negative impacts to the character of the neighborhood and without upsetting the naturally evolved and existing land uses for those areas. BRT is also not a stepping stone to trolleys or light rail.

The real issues of public transit in our community

If our ultimate goal is to improve public transit in the Eugene/Springfield metropolitan area, increasing ridership on existing LTD routes would get us far closer. The current bus system is extremely underutilized. Most buses are running almost empty. Investments spent on making our current bus system better functioning, more efficient and appealing to everyone would have the greatest impact. Improving the convenience and efficiency of bus routes, transfers and intermodal connections would help boost ridership numbers, and if the negative stigma associated with riding LTD buses could be eliminated, public transit would become far more appealing to all socio-economic sectors of the population. At that point, ridership numbers would increase dramatically.

The public transit/land use connection

Public transit can be a very effective a tool for creating and reinforcing good land use patterns. However, the Em-X West Eugene project (in any of its proposed forms) would actually be a huge set-back for promoting public transit in Eugene.

Em-X should not be a trade-off in which we have to permanently sacrifice “Assets” of existing neighborhoods in order to provide a short term windfall to LTD. West 11th and West 13th from downtown to Chambers Street and the Amazon walking/biking path are major assets to the city and to the surrounding neighborhoods. The graceful canopy of

trees that form a Gothic archway along West 11th makes it a visual “gateway” street. That canopy of mature shade trees beautifies and shades the street and homes along that street, protects pedestrians from car traffic and forms a gateway leading to the heart of the city.

The Amazon Canal Option

Another crazy suggestion by LTD was to run the line along Amazon Canal adjacent to (or in place of) the walking/biking path. (Wow! All that open land to build their dedicated right-of-way without any construction hindrance! The threat of losing that bit of tranquility and nature in the backyard of the central city certainly did the job of getting people riled up about a worst-case-scenario and advocating for Em-X construction along 11th or 13th.) After all, an Amazon Canal route would only conflict with existing automobile traffic at the cross streets. However, Amazon Canal and the bike/pedestrian path as they exist right now are invaluable public assets. Turning the Amazon into a major bus transportation corridor would have meant giving up one major irreplaceable public asset for the questionable and unknown benefits of another. In addition, there are no specific “destinations” along the route. The more densely we grow, the more we will need nearby public open space. Building a bus route along the Amazon Canal would have created a major land-use debacle, a planner’s nightmare.

6th and 7th Avenues

Any place where transportation “improvements” are made will ultimately be affected positively or negatively by the accompanying land-use changes that are adherent with those “improvements”. However, two of our major streets that would indeed benefit the most from land-use changes are 6th and 7th Avenues. Through the flawed visions of 1950s and 60s urban and transportation planners, those streets were sacrificed to the automobile and thus became dominated by automobile traffic (four lanes one-way on each street) with newer buildings and land uses that are totally incompatible with a thoughtfully designed pedestrian and transit oriented urban center. The newer buildings that have taken up residence along those streets, especially in the central city, are essentially “highway buildings”, not urban center buildings. There are no mixed-use or housing developments. Those structures that have been added are oversized, out-of-scale office/bank buildings without regard to any interface with foot traffic. There are no shops or windows on the ground floors to attract or have any degree of interest to a pedestrian. The buildings are, architecturally speaking, perhaps only slightly interesting from a distance, or at most, meant to be seen and perceived from a fast moving car. A successful building design should create interest from multiple depths such as from a distance or from across the street or from up close. Unfortunately, those massive buildings are only large obstacles to pedestrian traffic and interest. Concentrating transit improvements on 6th and 7th would encourage higher density/mixed use development of transit oriented nodes around the transit stops. It’s our urban environment. We have the choice of making it beautiful and fully functional.

An ambiguous proposal sent to the council for a vote

The Em-X West Eugene extension proposal that LTD presented to the council for vote was so ambiguous that it did not give a final version, but instead presented two entirely different potential routes. The two versions were the 11th/13th option and the 6th/7th option. The 6th and 7th Avenue proposed route (added by popular demand) was probably meant only be a “red herring”, since LTD has no real desire to build there. Of all the earlier proposed options, LTD allowed the inclusion of the 6th/7th option in its proposal to the council knowing it was their best option for getting at their desired 11th/13th option, once the council voted to generally accept a West Eugene extension. LTD knows that taking lanes away from car traffic on 6th and 7th Avenues would be too controversial. Also, because the traffic lights along 6th and 7th are already perfectly timed to move traffic along those streets at 30 mph, there would be no need for dedicated bus lanes. Why would we need expensive, publicly funded infrastructure that gives no benefits?

The 11th/13th option would have destroyed the character of two streets and would have put in place permanent and costly infrastructure, fixing the bulk of transit options a distant ½ mile south of AMTRAK.

A 6th/7th option would bring transit closer to the train station. 6th and 7th Avenues have the best connections to both River Road and Hwy 99. Greater transit options on 6th and 7th would help reinforce the potential for residential housing, multiple-use and denser transit oriented nodes along those streets. Even though 6th and 7th are the most logical choices for improving transit, LTD did not favor 6th and 7th because a dedicated transit lane would be empty most of the time and would make automobile turns on and off those streets difficult and dangerous.

If the MPO feels obligated to advocate for wasting public money on any project touting itself as public transit “improvements”, then one would have to consider that the development of a West Eugene Em-X along 6th and 7th would do less harm than placing it on 11th or 13th (which were LTD’s primary choices). The 11th or 13th choices would have altered the character of those streets and the many already-existing, well-developed land use patterns that have evolved naturally over the history of our community.

Local, Limited and Express Buses

Em-X to West Eugene does not make sense. A simple, no-cost, do-it-today solution is to have three types of bus service running along 6th and 7th streets: Local, Limited and Express buses.

Local buses would stop at every stop along the way (roughly one stop every three blocks. In the Downtown area there might be stops at two block intervals). A Limited bus would run at peak times and would make only limited stops (for example: it would stop at the main nodes of roughly at 6 block intervals). An Express bus is also one that is employed at peak commute hours. It may have one or two stops in the downtown area or at major nodes but then would not begin frequent stops until it reaches the outer areas of the line.

The types of buses would be distinguished by the lit destination sign over the front and rear windows: “W 6th to W11th via Chambers Ltd” or “W 6th to W11th via Chambers Exp”, etc.

Downtown Transit Station

The biggest impediment to good, functional, attractive public transit in Eugene is its relatively new downtown transit station and the antiquated Hub/Spoke system. Anyone who has ever lived in cities where public transit is efficient and successful (San Francisco, for example) knows that a central bus station is unnecessary and impractical.

Is the existence of the Downtown Transit Station even necessary, or is it actually impeding our progress toward making public transit, attractive, efficient and practical for everyone? How did we ever get along without a downtown transit station for 70 years?

Consider the facts:

The Eugene Downtown Transit Station:

- uses up 3/4 of a city block of potential dense, multiple-use, pedestrian friendly urban core space (or potential public park space). Property/business taxes are no longer collected there.
- is a full ½ mile south of the AMTRAK rail station, making multi-modal (bus/train) connections impractical. Imagine arriving at the station by train during inclement weather with luggage or with a family or with a baby stroller, etc. What responsibilities will we have if we become the southern terminus to the Cascade Corridor high speed rail? People using rail and public transit want a point-to-point experience. Any sane, practical transportation planner would have considered that before building the bus station so far from the train station.
- fixes the center of Downtown too far south.
- locks Eugene into an outdated hub/spoke system of transit routes long past the time when we should have been moving to a grid system.

The Grid System vs. the Hub/Spoke System

The hub/spoke system of bus lines in Eugene is antiquated. The increase in the percentage of all trips made on LTD transit has been negligible since the construction of the main Downtown transit station. According to the census estimates, using our current hub/spoke bus system, public transit only accounts for about 3% to 5% of all trips made during workdays. The downtown station serves more as a parking lot for buses. Is a parking lot for buses downtown the best use of that space? A central hub system of buses requires a considerable amount of “down time” for buses, because the individual bus scheduled departures must all be coordinated to allow passengers to make timely connections. That is not an efficient use of bus time. Buses are either idle or left idling at the downtown station for much of the time.

In a grid system of bus routes, the buses are always moving. They are not idle or idling. They move continuously from one edge of town straight through and out to the opposite edge of town where they turn around and reverse their course. For that reason they are able to run with more frequency. Each and every East-West transit line will intersect with each and every North-South line at its own given point/transit stop along its route.

The Downtown transit station creates a hangout for vagrants, idle youth and trouble makers. Personally, I feel unsafe walking anywhere near the station day or night. I bristle at having to pass through the clouds of cigarette smoke or at being verbally accosted or panhandled by the element that hangs out there. Within a well designed grid system of bus routes, there is no one single central point or station where riders are all deposited, make their transfers or just hang out.

A Public Entity Without Public Oversight

LTD receives the bulk of its operating expenses from public monies, has the authority to acquire property by eminent domain, and yet it still has a board that is appointed and not elected. Without the public oversight of a publicly elected board, LTD will continue to waste the public's money and play havoc with the urban environment with their grandiose schemes.

It is time to figure out strategies for creating good, functional, pleasant and attractive public transit systems. Continuing to rely on the automobile for our main mode of transportation is unsustainable both to the environment and to sane urban planning. Therefore, technology and the new all-electric automobiles are not going to save us. They will only shift the burden of supplying power from diminishing petroleum resources to diminishing electric resources. The majority of the country does not have the hydro resources that we have. Their increased use of electricity to charge up their cars will mean building more dams, burning more biomass and coal or building more nuclear power plants to supply the increased need for electricity. Their increased need for electricity will ultimately drive up the cost of electricity here since we are now all on the same electric grid competing for the same power. Portland, Oregon has always in recent years led the way and become a model for the rest of the country in good land-use and transportation planning. Perhaps Eugene should be striving to do the same.