

Containing the Commercial Strip

... problems along state highways

Highways and highway interchanges are prime locations for commercial development. Highways provide easy access to stores and offices and good visibility. Thus, over the last 50 years, urban

Since 1987, piecemeal plan changes to commercial from other designations have occurred on more than 4,800 acres. . .much of it along state highways. This is equivalent to an area that is 26 times the size of downtown Salem.

development has followed and been shaped by highway investments. The result is that most Oregon communities are auto-dependent and rely heavily on state highways for local access and circulation.

Existing patterns of highway-oriented, auto-dependent development were recognized in local land use plans when they were adopted and acknowledged under the Oregon Statewide Planning Goals in the 1970s and 1980s. As local governments responded to individual applications

to rezone land to commercial use, these patterns grew in a piecemeal fashion. The process has not resulted in coherent, well-planned neighborhoods and communities. And now, auto-dependent commercial strip development is the dominant feature of urban form in Oregon.



Characteristics of highway-oriented, auto-dependent commercial development

- individual or small groups of stores or offices are isolated from other uses
- low-intensity development patterns result in stores that are single-story and offices that are one or two stories
- surface parking lots, often large, are intended for customers of one store, or sometimes only a small strip of buildings, resulting in more total parking needed along the entire strip than if parking were shared
- parking lots are generally located between the stores and the streets
- parcels have one or more driveways directly accessing the highway
- no local street system is available to provide convenient access between uses.

Is this a local or state concern?

Both. Obviously, citizens and local governments have a significant interest in the types and locations of development in their own communities. However, there are reasons why this is also a state issue.

First, state highways are built primarily to carry traffic between cities and through regions. As urban areas spread out and fill up, the effect is usually to put more local traffic on state highways. This effect is especially heavy where development is directly along state highways. More traffic congestion occurs as autos move among the commercial establishments and adjacent uses. "Friction" with through traffic is generated by autos turning off and on the highway. Over time, this results in congestion and safety problems leading to more traffic signals and lowering of posted speeds. A demand for major highway improvements is created -- **at a cost the state simply cannot afford.**

Second, it's a problem that no one community can effectively manage by itself. A few communities, like Ashland and Corvallis, have limited highway-oriented commercial development and simply seen that development locate along a state highway in a neighboring community. The result is to push yet more local traffic onto the state highway system.

Why is the Department of Land Conservation and Development concerned about this issue?

The Department of Land Conservation and Development (DLCD) administers the statewide land use planning program. Highway-oriented, auto-dependent development is not consistent with two tenets of Oregon's land use planning program. One of these, *efficient use of land*, is expressed in Statewide Planning Goal 14, Urbanization. The other, *livability*, was established by Senate Bill 100 when the statewide planning program was created by the Oregon Legislature, "to assure the highest level of livability in Oregon."

Efficient use of land. Highway-oriented, auto-dependent commercial development is a low-intensity land use. It uses large amounts of land spread out in linear form over long distances along state highways. The spread-out, linear pattern of development makes it extremely inconvenient to move among businesses without driving from one establishment or small group of establishments to another. This generates significant traffic, creating the need for new and wider roads, such as bypasses or truck routes. Adding additional capacity to existing roads then spawns more low-intensity, auto-dependent commercial development which, in turn, generates more traffic.

Livability. Highway-oriented, auto-dependent commercial development impacts community livability. It generates traffic congestion that is not consistent with the "through" function of highways where traffic should move at moderate to high speeds. The congestion makes it difficult for people and goods to move *through* urban areas to get to their destinations. At best, these delays are experienced at periodic, well-timed traffic signals with a reasonably good flow of traffic. At worst, the delays happen repeatedly as traffic is slowed by

the continual ingress and egress of cars along the route or by having to wait through multiple phases of traffic signals at congested intersections.

Other livability problems are related to the auto-dependent nature of strip commercial development. Commercial services, organized in this fashion, are very difficult, if not impossible, to access by foot. People that do not drive have very limited means to get to these services. Many households find it is necessary to spend a significant amount of their budgets to own more than one car. In addition, more driving and congestion result in more air and water pollution.

Does DLCD want to stop "big box" development?

No. DLCD is not proposing to stop big box or any other type of commercial development. The department is also not proposing to limit commercial development in *existing* commercial zones.

The objective of the proposed rule is to provide for more compact commercial development that fits in with the adjoining land uses, connects to the nearby street system, and does not detract from the function of state highways.

DLCD is proposing rules that would direct communities to plan for commercial development along state highways to achieve:

- **less sprawl**
- **fewer auto trips**
- **more convenient access by pedestrians, bicycles, and transit, where available.**

When a local community considers *rezoning* of property along a state highway to commercial use, the proposed rules would direct communities to look more comprehensively at the location, pattern, and design of commercial development.

What would the resulting development look like?

Individual large retailers could be added to the edge of an existing downtown. Also, they could be included in a new mixed-use center that includes small retail shops, housing, and offices. It can include the characteristics that we associate with downtowns, such as a grid street pattern and buildings oriented to the street.

As demonstrated here by a development in Gaithersburg, MD, a new regional center that includes one or more large retailers and several small stores could be developed. New neighborhood shopping centers with, for instance, a grocery store, dry cleaner, coffee shop, etc. could be developed. All of these are examples where the uses are clustered and the site designs are conducive to pedestrians, bicycles, and transit, as well as the auto.



photos courtesy of
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Highway 97 in Bend

The state built a bypass of the City of Bend's downtown for Highway 97 in the 1960s. Over time, retail uses of the pattern and design described above occurred along the facility. By the 1990's the highway reached intolerable levels of congestion. Now, the state is spending \$100 million to build another facility, the Bend Parkway, to accommodate through traffic on Highway 97 in Bend.

Don't we already have policies and regulations that deal with this?

No. Although the state has adopted several measures that seek to better integrate land use and transportation planning, *none of these will stop the expansion of commercial strips.* In 1991, the Land Conservation and Development Commission (LCDC) adopted the Transportation Planning Rule. In 1999, the Oregon Transportation Commission (OTC) adopted an updated 1999 Highway Plan and updated access management rules. These policies improve transportation planning, but don't provide the means to avoid another "Bend" or "Woodburn." Here's why.

The Transportation Planning Rule (TPR). Section 0060 of the TPR (see page 6) appears to address the issue because it requires local governments to assure that land use plan amendments are supported by adequate planned transportation capacity. This does *not* stop incremental plan changes that result—in their cumulative effect—in highways and communities that are dominated by commercial strip development.

- Section 0060 is triggered only where a land use plan amendment would exceed the capacity of *planned* transportation facilities. Quite

often, highway capacity beyond that required for expected needs over the next 15 to 20 years is available or planned in a local transportation system plan. This is especially true in urban fringe areas and at interchanges that are "lightly" developed. But even where enough planned highway capacity is not available to accommodate a proposed land use plan amendment, local governments can still allow more commercial use by simply amending their transportation plans to add *planned* capacity to support development.

- Section 0060 effectively protects planned highway capacity for the next 15 to 20 years. Any excess planned capacity is essentially available to allow more intense urban use. Again, where there is "excess capacity" it can be used to allow highway-oriented development patterns.
- *Planned* highway capacity is not financially constrained. Local governments can and do make very optimistic assumptions in their transportation system plans about their ability (or the state's ability) to fund highway improvements. Even in the Portland, Salem, Eugene/Springfield, and Medford metropolitan areas, where there is a federal financial con-

Woodburn I-5 Interchange

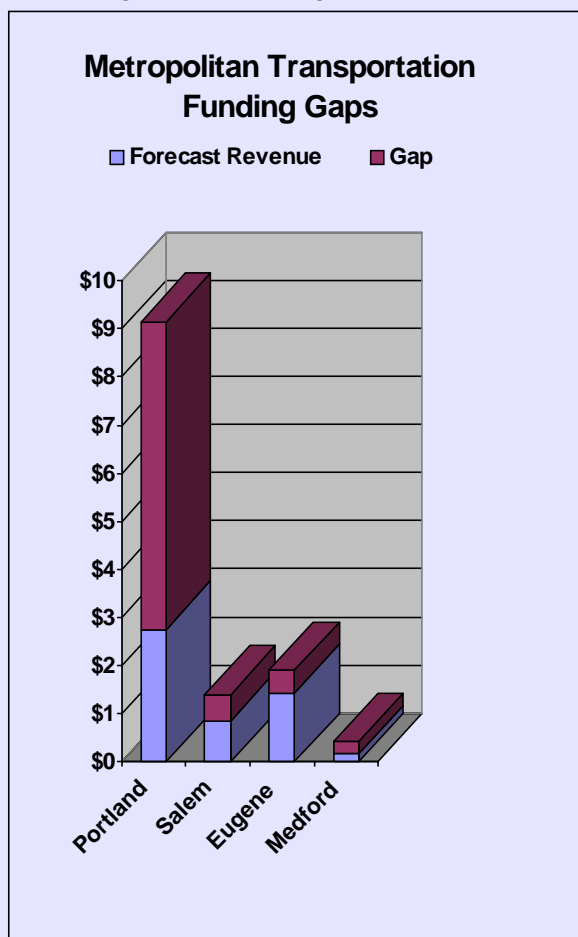
Since the TPR was adopted, there has been significant highway-oriented, auto-dependent development near the I-5 interchange at Woodburn. A Walmart, several car dealerships, a factory outlet center, and several trucking firms have all located at the interchange. The development has essentially used up the available capacity at the interchange.

Interchange improvements have been proposed to serve the planned development in the Woodburn urban growth boundary. However, the planned improvements include a significant increment of **additional capacity**. When Woodburn amends its transportation system plan to include the proposed improvements, it may, consistent with Section 0060 of the TPR, amend zoning to allow additional uses that would use the additional capacity. Already, two plan amendments have been discussed. One would rezone eight acres to commercial in order to expand the existing factory outlet center. The other would add up to 100 acres to the UGB for industrial uses.

straint requirement, the adopted plans include improvements that exceed an assumed financial constraint of the equivalent of a 25 cent per gallon increase in the gas tax over 20 years. The result is that local governments can presume that big new transportation facilities will be built.

Statewide, we have a huge gap

... between what is planned and what is likely to be built. Land use plan amendments that rely on these improvements worsen congestion problems and create more demand for the highway improvements. This serves to draw demand for state spending to urban fringe and interchange areas.



LCDC adopted the Transportation Planning Rule in 1991. In adopting the rule, the commission recognized that auto-dependent development is not sustainable and needed to be changed to avoid the congestion, livability, and neighborhood disruption problems experienced in other areas of the country. The TPR directed local governments to adopt Transportation System Plans (TSPs) to plan to

reduce reliance on the automobile. But, LCDC recognized that changes to land use patterns were an essential element of reducing reliance on the auto. The commission understood that directing changes to land use patterns was important for transportation purposes, but decided not to adopt a rule at that time because it was also in the midst of a comprehensive evaluation of the state’s urban growth management policies. In adopting the rule, LCDC also adopted the following policy statement:

“In the course of this rulemaking effort the commission has determined that avoiding the kinds of transportation problems that face rapidly growing urban areas in other states will require reconsideration of how urban growth will be accommodated. The reason is that the pattern of growth set out in existing land use plans has a major effect on the kind of transportation system that we need. The separation of residential, commercial, industrial and other uses requires that people drive virtually everywhere they need to go. This creates a need for a major road system which, in turn, encourages people to live, work and shop at increasingly spread out locations.

While the commission is convinced that reconsideration of land use patterns in our urban areas is needed, it has decided not to adopt a statewide requirement for reevaluation of land use at this time. The reason is that the commission is now in the midst of a comprehensive evaluation of the state’s urban growth management policies. Based on this evaluation, the commission expects to make and recommend changes to the state’s policies on how growth within urban areas should occur.”

In 1998, LCDC reviewed and amended the TPR. The amendments primarily relate to planning for metropolitan areas – Portland, Salem, Eugene, and Medford — to reduce reliance on the automobile. In the process leading up to these amendments, a subcommittee of LCDC considered recommendations for rule amendments addressing land use patterns inside urban growth boundaries (UGBs). The subcommittee affirmed LCDC’s prior policy determination when it agreed that these issues were broader and more closely related to the implementation of Statewide Planning Goal 14. The amended rule requires that metropolitan areas that expect vehicle miles traveled (VMT) per

capita to increase must prepare an integrated land use and transportation plan over the next three years. Since the project to address Goal 14 issues had recently begun, the subcommittee did not propose broader TPR amendments.

1999 Oregon Highway Plan. The Highway Plan does not purport to regulate land use, nor does it. The Highway Plan creates a system of highway segment designations to help ODOT and local governments coordinate land use and transportation decisions. These include: special transportation areas (STAs), commercial centers, urban business areas (UBA), and urban (generally the default treatment for state highways within UGBs).

The segment designations recognize planned land uses near the highway and the function of the highway. However, the plan does not provide clear direction to local governments to avoid plan amendments that would incrementally consume the capacity of the state highway.

ODOT Access Management Rules. These rules regulate access to state highways from adjacent properties and local streets. They address safety and the operation of the highway within the context of a proposed land use on an adjacent property. The access management rules do not address what land uses are permitted near highways or the amount of traffic that can be generated by those uses. Also, they do not require development of a local street system that can handle traffic travelling among those uses.

Conclusion

Over the last 50 years, auto-dependent commercial development has developed along highways to the point where it dominates the form and character of many of Oregon communities. As a result, most Oregon communities are auto-dependent and rely heavily on state highways for local access and circulation. This causes land use efficiency and livability problems. Local communities can address the issue, but few have done so effectively.

State policies would provide a level playing field for communities to plan for alternatives to commercial strip development and would help protect taxpayer investment in state highways.

Section 0060 of the Transportation Planning Rule

- (1) Amendments to functional plans, acknowledged comprehensive plans, and land use regulations which significantly affect a transportation facility shall assure that allowed land uses are consistent with the identified function, capacity, and performance standards (e.g. level of service, volume to capacity ratio, etc.) of the facility. This shall be accomplished by either:
 - (a) Limiting allowed land uses to be consistent with the *planned* function, capacity, and performance standards of the transportation facility;
 - (b) Amending the TSP to provide transportation facilities adequate to support the proposed land uses consistent with the requirements of this division;
 - (c) Altering land use designations, densities, or design requirements to reduce demand for automobile travel and meet travel needs through other modes; or
 - (d) Amending the TSP to modify the planned function, capacity and performance standards, as needed, to accept greater motor vehicle congestion to promote mixed use, pedestrian friendly development where multimodal travel choices are provided.
- (2) A plan or land use regulation amendment significantly affects a transportation facility if it:
 - (a) Changes the functional classification of an existing or planned transportation facility;
 - (b) Changes standards implementing a functional classification system;
 - (c) Allows types or levels of land uses which would result in levels of travel or access which are inconsistent with the functional classification of a transportation facility; or
 - (d) Would reduce the performance standards of the facility below the minimum acceptable level identified in the TSP.

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