

Background

The Portland Central City is the economic and cultural center of the region, with the largest concentration of people and jobs in Oregon. It is also at the core of the regional transportation system, and its mobility problems and constraints affect local and regional mobility and the regional economy. Over the next 20 years, as the region grows by 635,000 more people and 378,000 jobs, and the Central City absorbs 35,000 people and 32,000 jobs, these mobility problems will become even more acute, further affecting regional quality of life and long term economic vitality.

The Metro 2040 Growth Concept, originally adopted in 1995, is a 50-year plan managing growth for the region. In addition to setting the framework for where growth will be concentrated in the region, it calls for a high quality transit system as part of the regional multimodal transportation solution. MAX light rail is the backbone of the transit system, carrying more than 115,000 daily trips and playing a vital role in serving the growing demand for travel between the Central City and other regional jobs and housing centers defined in the 2040 Growth Concept. All of the region's light rail lines cross through the Central City on surface streets, where growing traffic congestion and multiple signalized intersections affect travel time, reliability and system capacity. All of region's light rail lines cross the Willamette River on the Steel Bridge, which was built in 1912 and is one of the oldest lift bridges in the United States. The bridge can accommodate only a single pair of tracks, and trains must travel at 10 miles per hour, limiting present and future throughput. The bridge is seismically vulnerable and would likely not survive a major earthquake. Its age and condition already require increasing maintenance, and bridge closures and lifts disrupt the entire system.

Slow travel times through the Central City, coupled with frequent delays, reliability issues and overcrowding are major problems today. As the region grows, these issues will become even more critical.

The purpose of the proposed project is to increase regional mobility and capacity by improving transit travel times and system reliability to and through the Portland Central City, and:

- Improve mobility between regional centers;
- Increase transit rail capacity and frequency without impacting other surface mobility options;
- Increase transit ridership and transit mode share;
- Create a reliable alternative to cross-town travel on congested roadways;
- Support the growing transportation demand of key destinations, present and future development, population and employment growth expected in the Central City and the region.

A project is needed to

- Address increasingly unreliable and slow transit trips to and through the Portland Central City;
- Address transit capacity and reliability issues constraining the regional transit system ;
- Accommodate peak future light rail transit demands;
- Allow more frequent light rail service on all lines;
- Improve access from households to jobs, education, and social opportunities in and across the Central City and other regional centers;

- Ensure long-term regional mobility for low-income residents, and to reduce barriers between housing and transportation cost-burdened households and employment opportunities;
- Create the transit infrastructure needed to support future expansions of regional transit service;
- Increase the transit system's resiliency to seismic and environmental changes;
- Provide a more competitive alternative to crosstown auto trips on congested freeways.