

Grading on a Curve

Enviro 'champs' ignoring the biggest issues

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Troubled Bridges Over Water
Time for Transportation Triage
Federal law requires 20 year plans
Highway plans ignore Peak Traffic

On Nov. 27, EW's Slant profiled the "Environmental Scorecard" of the Oregon League of Conservation Voters. EW drew attention to "the relatively high scores racked up by state reps and senators in our part of the valley." Unfortunately, OLCV was grading on a curve to make Democrats in Salem look better than they are.

One of the most important votes of the 2013 session, not included in OLCV's scorecard, was to appropriate \$450 million toward the Columbia River Crossing (CRC), a \$3 billion to \$4 billion dollar boondoggle that would widen I-5 to 16 lanes north of the bridge. The Oregon House voted 45-11 in favor and the Senate voted 18-11 in favor. Only two Democrats in the House and one in the Senate voted "no."

EW highlighted Rep. John Lively's 94 percent OLCV rating, but did not mention his vote for the CRC nor his previous promotion of bigger roads while working for ODOT.

OLCV's website cites 10 state reps as environmental champions, but only one of those 10 voted against the CRC. Designating highway expansion supporters as "environmental leaders" suggests political partisanship has become more important than environmental protection.

The only legislator representing Lane County who was against CRC was Rep. Bruce Hanna of Roseburg, a Republican. Some Republicans expressed dislike of the token transit component. Republicans were freer than Democrats to oppose Gov. Kitzhaber's campaign for CRC.

CRC is now bogged down in financial chaos since Washington state legislators did not appropriate anything for it. However, the project is legally approved and an Obama administration priority.

In November 2008, Gov. Kulongoski's Transportation Vision Committee released a report that called for \$18 billion in new and expanded state highways, including over \$1 billion in Eugene and Springfield. 1000 Friends of Oregon, Oregon Environmental Council and Environment Oregon were part of this committee, but they were window dressing to show that all points of view were supposedly considered. If these groups had a minority report to dissent from the highway promotion, they kept it very quiet.

In 2013, ODOT started building two new highways: the Newberg Dundee Bypass (through farmland) and the Sunrise Freeway in Clackamas County. Both projects only have part of their funding, so ODOT is building segments and hoping for the rest of the money in the future. I attended public hearings for both of these

bypasses and did not see any environmental groups at either event.

Also in 2013, ODOT approved a new freeway in Medford, the Route 62 bypass. I didn't attend the hearing. The only environmental group that sent comments was Rogue Valley Audubon Society, which complained construction would harm birds.

Federal aid highways such as CRC have to plan for traffic two decades in the future, not current congestion. Our transportation plans ignore the fact that traffic levels peaked in Oregon in 2003 and Oregon's main fuel source, the Alaska Pipeline, peaked in 1988 and has dropped three quarters since then. It's anyone's guess how much energy will be available for traffic in the 2030s, but it will be much less than the current flow, especially if the Alaska Pipeline closes due to "low flow." Current levels are just above the minimum threshold needed for the pipeline to operate in the Arctic winter.



Here in Eugene from 1999 through 2007, I was the "road scholar" for a proposed lawsuit that prevented the West Eugene Parkway, a bypass of West 11th through the West Eugene Wetlands. WETLANDS vs. Federal Highway Administration was not filed because the feds withdrew the project and selected "no build." Details are at SustainEugene.org.

The lawsuit focused on legal precedents, including Section 4(f), which prohibits federal aid highways through parks. But it also would have tried to have set a new precedent combining the facts of peak oil and peak traffic as reasons the 20-year planning rule no longer justifies highway expansions.

Since then, I have looked for other freeway fights around the country that could use this legal strategy to create a precedent. A state-by-state list of plans for \$1 trillion of highway expansions across the country is at PeakTraffic.org.

The most energetic environmental efforts against new roads are often in places where liberal Democrats are surrounded by conservative Republicans (Bloomington, Ind., and Louisville, Ky., are examples). The professional environmentalists in these places know the state government is not their ally (nor their funder).

While trains and transit could play important roles for post-peak transportation, recognizing we're passing the limits to growth and relocalizing food production are probably the most important responses to peaked traffic and peaked energy.



Mark Robinowitz of Eugene is author of "Peak Traffic and Transportation Triage: a Legal Strategy to Cancel Trillion Dollar Highway Plans and Prepare for Post Peak Travel," at PeakTraffic.org.

Sent to me from "a long time environmental activist and former OLCV board member":

OLCV continues to disappoint me. I wrote them after the special session in which local control over genetic engineering was thrown under the bus and told them they should target on a Democrat architect of that compromise for defeat in the primary, just to show that environmentalists mean business. I received no reply. That they left off the CRC from their list of counted votes doesn't surprise me in the slightest. They are an arm of the Democratic party and deathly afraid of organized labor.