

COLUMN: Finding ways to help the Albina District grow

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ODOT's Rose Quarter Project will provide opportunities for communities that have historically been left behind.

In the early 1960s, during the nation's interstate highway system construction, the Oregon Department of Transportation built a freeway that displaced hundreds of Black families.

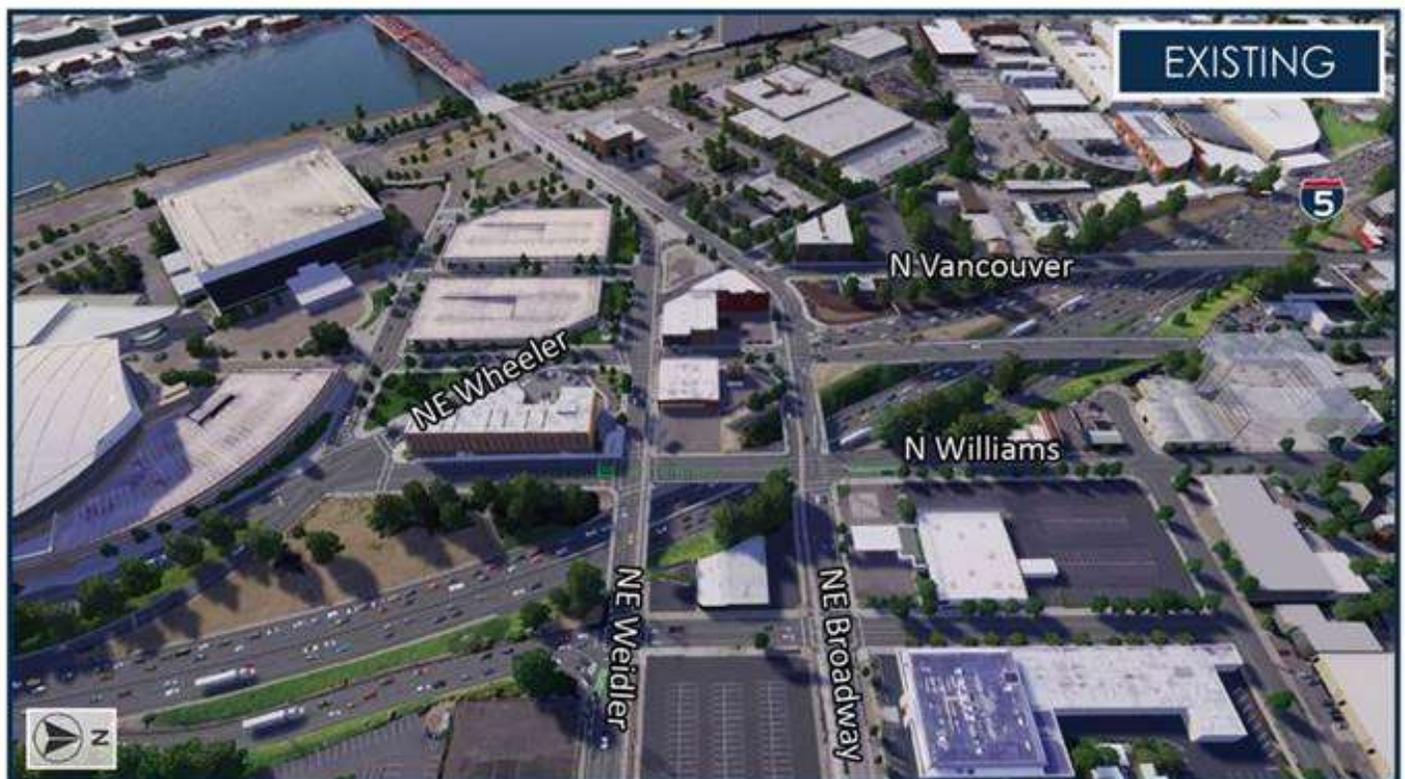
The section of Interstate 5 through the Rose Quarter destroyed the cultural heart of Portland's Black community. With the I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement Project, ODOT finds itself today with an opportunity to recognize past harms and take action.

This starts with acknowledging these transgressions and elevating the voices of the historically impacted Albina community. What we have heard as we continue to listen and do things differently is that providing economic opportunities is paramount.

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One way we are taking action on that value is by pushing the envelope on existing programs to provide economic opportunities to communities that have been negatively impacted by the construction and operation of the transportation system.

The I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement Project will provide an estimated \$100 million in contracts with companies owned by minorities and women through the Disadvantaged Business Enterprise program. This program has been around for more than a half-century, but this is the first time we've committed resources like this to address past harms through the modernization and safety improvements planned for the Rose Quarter.



COURTESY: ODOT - The Rose Quarter as it presently exists.



- ① New, upgraded pedestrian and bicycle paths in the area of Broadway/Weidler and Vancouver/Williams
- ② Covers over the highway where bridges cross over I-5
- ③ Improved pedestrian and bicycle access to transit
- ④ A direct road connection over I-5 between N Hancock St and N Dixon St
- ⑤ New shoulders and ramp-to-ramp lanes (auxiliary lanes) along I-5 between I-84 and I-405
- ⑥ New bicycle and pedestrian bridge over I-5

COURTESY: ODOT - The Rose Quarter with the improvements proposed as part of the Rose Quarter Project.

The project also provides a mentoring program specific to the Rose Quarter Project, so smaller firms that are subcontractors for this project can grow and be given an opportunity to be a prime contractor in the future. One such future subcontractor is Raimore Construction, a minority-owned company from Northeast Portland.

When asked how the I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement project can help his company, Jeff Moreland, Raimore's president, said, "It will be huge. We'll hire more people, hire more subcontractors and help more people go from an apprentice to a journeyman. The key is to keep people employed long enough to learn a skill."

As ODOT modernizes the transportation system in the Portland region, two of the goals of the agency are to provide short-term and long-term jobs. Short-term jobs will put people to work now. That means diversifying the workforce to obtain skills for family wage jobs. The program will enable firms who employ these workers to build capacity, grow within the construction industry, and remain competitive in the long run, thus becoming long-term employers.

"This program keeps people working," said Moreland. "We've put employees through school to get their engineering degrees, and some of them have spun off their own companies." These workers and companies are from the local economy and are impacted by the COVID-19 economic effects.

Some say these investments are short-lived and will not contribute to intergenerational wealth for minority communities. I disagree. These companies make a difference in their communities. When we see them grow, they hire more people and provide more benefits like health care and retirement. They buy homes and make a better life for their families. When someone gets trained, they learn a skill for life.

The Disadvantaged Business Enterprise program allows companies to grow," Amber Ontiveros, owner of Ontiveros and Associates, a local minority and woman-owned firm, told me. She's a transportation consultant who advises ODOT on minority contracting programs.

"We get to cultivate and diversify our workforce, and maybe we help out some small business that might not have otherwise had a chance. They're from the community. They're not from another state. They're from here, right in our

neighborhoods. It's all about ladders of opportunity. Because the project is spread over multiple years, it creates stability for the minority workforce."

Whether it's the planned multi-modal connections with the I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement Project or replacing the 100-year-old Interstate Bridge, we will be creating a system that will maximize safety and mobility, reduce climate impacts and reflect our values on equity and inclusion. We will see that these investments empower those historically impacted.