

## **I-5 Rose Quarter Community Advisory Committee Response to Disbandment**

September 14, 2020

To:

Oregon Transportation Commission  
Governor Kate Brown  
Oregon Legislature - Joint Committee on Transportation  
Megan Channell, Project Manager I-5 Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion  
Oregon Department of Transportation Director Kris Strickler  
Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion - Community Advisory Committee  
Rose Quarter Freeway Expansion - Executive Steering Committee  
Future Members of Historic Albina Advisory Board

We write to you today as community members who were chosen by the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) to serve on the Interstate 5 Rose Quarter Community Advisory Committee (I5RQ CAC), which has now been disbanded. We have deep concerns about this project, which we need to share with our community.<sup>1</sup>

We appreciate that ODOT is finally attempting to center Black voices from the Albina neighborhood as part of its community engagement process. It is only the first step of many that ODOT needs to take to address the long overlooked concerns and needs of Black community leaders and organizers, and to design a project that actually builds wealth, health, and safety for Portland's Black community rather than continually degrading all three as the current project would do. The I5 RQ project in its current form was created and funded via HB2017, but we know the history of this transportation project is far older than 2017, as is the history of racism and racial discrimination faced by Black, Indigenous, and other communities of color in Portland. The intersections of these two histories are well documented<sup>2</sup>, yet ODOT has not acknowledged the damage done to the Albina community when I5 was originally built, much less begun to listen and respond in good faith to the perspectives and needs of the people who were most impacted by the original construction.

We hope that this new Historic Albina Advisory Board (HAAB) will not feel unheard and undervalued in the same way that we have felt as part of the CAC. We share the feelings of Liz Fother-Branch who was born and raised in Albina, and who resigned from the CAC in June, saying **"I find it frustrating to sit on advisory committees and know that all of the design, financial decisions, and considerations have already been determined long before any real restorative justice can take place."** In order to truly and openly listen to Black residents

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<sup>1</sup> We were planning to bring this letter to an Oregon Transportation Commission meeting, but for some reason the commission isn't accepting oral public testimony.

<sup>2</sup> [Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000](#)

with deep ties to the Albina neighborhood, ODOT needs to pause the project and needs to find a willingness to start the project from scratch while they listen to the HAAB and other community organizations such as Albina Vision Trust. True restorative justice means the perpetrator of the damage does not dictate the restorative practice or outcomes; restorative justice practices need to be used as the starting point of the conversation, not used as co-opted language or as an additional consideration for the project that is added after the fact. Perhaps ODOT needs to be reminded that restorative justice, by definition, means more than just listening: *it means working with the Albina community to repair the harm originally caused by ODOT.*

We are deeply suspicious of the fact that the Board will be made up of 11 appointed members and only 6 at-large members. This ensures that ODOT can stack the HAAB with representatives who agree with ODOT's freeway expansion plans, despite the numerous concerns expressed by members of the CAC; Albina Vision Trust; Harriet Tubman Middle School students and parents; environmental and transportation advocacy organizations<sup>3</sup>; neighborhood organizations<sup>4</sup>; Portland Bureau of Transportation Commissioner Chloe Eudaly, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler, and Multnomah County Commissioner Jessica Vega Pederson, who have all announced they no longer support the project and have withdrawn from ODOT's Rose Quarter Project Executive Steering Committee<sup>5</sup>; the City of Portland, which has withdrawn all technical and jurisdictional support<sup>6</sup>, and the over 2000 Oregonians who submitted critical public comment during the Environmental Assessment last spring. We suspect that ODOT is trying to avoid a repeat of the CAC, in which ODOT selected all the members from the general community and was then met with strong opposition to the project taking place at all.

We urge potential members of the HAAB to be wary of ODOT's intentions and of any statements they make. For example, when we joined the CAC, ODOT's description of the committee stated: "The CAC's purpose is to bring community interests and values into the project's decision-making process regarding design aspects of the project that most directly affect the local community." CAC members made numerous requests to be able to provide input on all components of the project, including the I-5 roadway. In response, **we were repeatedly told by ODOT that we had no say** on the single largest part of the project that most directly affects the air quality, traffic congestion, and livability of the local community.

These are some of the concerns that we continue to have surrounding the I5 Rose Quarter Expansion project:

First, this project will increase carbon emissions, which is extremely worrying in the face of **global climate change, which disproportionately affects communities of color.** In addition,

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<sup>3</sup> Including OPAL - Environmental Justice Oregon, Oregon League of Conservation Voters, Climate Solutions, Center for Sustainable Economy, the Sierra Club Oregon Chapter, Neighbors for Clean Air, 350 PDX, Portland Audubon Society, Oregon Environmental Council, Oregon Walks, The Street Trust, Community Cycling Center, Safe Routes to School PNW chapter, BikeLoud PDX, and Portland Bus Lane Project.

<sup>4</sup> Northeast Coalition of Neighborhoods, Eliot Neighborhood Association, Foster Powell Neighborhood Association, Irvington Community Association

<sup>5</sup> [Community nonprofit. Portland-area elected officials say they no longer support I-5 Rose Quarter project](#)

<sup>6</sup> [I-5 Rose Quarter project updates: City of Portland pulls all support. The Columbian weighs in. what comes next](#)

we know that any congestion eased through this project will be short lived, and will also contribute to more congestion in the long run due to the well documented principle of induced demand<sup>7</sup>. ODOT's own 2018 Feasibility Analysis<sup>8</sup> concluded that tolls could be effective to reduce congestion along the I-5 corridor, which would negate the need for this project while addressing congestion in the short and long term. ODOT should apply the lessons it has learned from this project and work with the community from the get-go to determine whether congestion pricing could be a better mechanism for solving congestion, implementing restorative justice, and improving health, safety, and wealth outcomes. It's fitting that ODOT's decision to disband the CAC was announced on the same day that *The Oregonian* published a story detailing how an ODOT audit conducted by the Secretary of State noted that the agency was doing an abysmal job of engaging bicycle and pedestrian advocates in advisory roles for their construction.<sup>9</sup>

Second, ODOT is touting this project as a job and wealth-building opportunity for the Black community. While DBE contracting policies are important in all state contracting, ODOT's current DBE process has no way to ensure that this job and wealth creation is happening for Portland's Black community. In addition to the fact that those opportunities are short lived, studies suggest that highway construction produces jobs at half of the rate of other infrastructure projects like multimodal transportation investments<sup>10</sup>. If we are serious about a job-intensive economic stimulus program to recover from the Covid-era recession, ***we must prioritize investments that employ as many Oregonians, and as many Black Oregonians, as possible.***

Third, ODOT has been less than upfront about the cost of the project. Originally estimated at **\$450-500 million** to complete, ODOT now estimates it would cost **\$715-795 million** to complete, and that number **doesn't even include the buildable caps without which this project is a nonstarter for Albina Vision**. Given the ever-escalating price tag, canceling the project may be the financially responsible thing for the State to do as ODOT faces looming and severe budget shortfalls<sup>11,12</sup>.

Lastly, ODOT has been continuing to move forward with the expansion despite comments from Governor Brown saying the project should not advance without support of Portland's Black Community. In fact, ODOT have dug in their heels, telling CAC members last month that **"this project is happening no matter what."** Numerous community organizations and partners, most prominently the Albina Vision Trust, worked with ODOT for years and ultimately determined the agency was fundamentally incapable of working with them to support a vision of restorative justice for the neighborhood. How can ODOT expect us to take their reform efforts seriously when they are continually giving us reason to distrust them?

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<sup>7</sup> [Transportation For America The Congestion Con](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Oregon Application to FHWA: Value Pricing Feasibility Analysis and Proposed Implementation](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Oregon could better reach out to bike, pedestrian groups before construction projects, audit finds](#)

<sup>10</sup> [To Create Jobs, Build Public Transit, Not Highways](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Gov. Brown: Rose Quarter Project 'Not Going To Proceed' Without Black Community Buy-in](#)

<sup>12</sup> [ODOT: Revenue loss due to COVID-19 deepens, could hit \\$250 million by 2024](#)

The Oregon Department of Transportation disbanded the CAC because we didn't play ball with them. We refused to be a compliant part of the non-transparent facade of community engagement that ODOT had created in the CAC. **We refused to rubber-stamp a project that will lead to poor air quality outcomes for children at Harriet Tubman Middle School and the neighborhood at large.** We refused to stop asking the hard questions, and we demanded that our voices, including and especially the voices of Black Portlanders, be heard. With the planned HAAB, ODOT is beginning to address one of the many problems with this project and its process, but we have very little confidence in their ability to do this right. Without reconsidering the project from scratch, the State risks continuing the "business as usual" approach that perpetuates racism, white supremacy, and the climate injustices that are embedded and interwoven into the very creation of I5 and the Rose Quarter.

Signed,

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