



# TRANSPORTATION INVESTMENT

## Who'd pay billions to buy 30 seconds?

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Do you remember the old TV show "The Six Million Dollar Man"? The premise was simple: Scientists, at great expense, create a superhero who is part man, part machine. It was a silly show. Today trucking and freight interests are pushing their own version: "The Six Billion Dollar Plan."

The Portland Business Alliance and the Port of Portland recently presented their "Cost of Congestion Study" to the Portland City Club. The study calls for \$6 billion in new regional transportation investment. But despite the superhero price tag, the plan would not spur economic development and would only marginally impact congestion.

If we had an extra \$6 billion, how could we best encourage economic development in the Portland region? Ask people this question and you'll hear some compelling ideas -- investing in higher education facilities, shoring up public schools, even giving away condominiums to 25,000 of the nation's hottest talents. Not a single person will say: Reduce my commute by 30 seconds.

The freight-movement community, however, is saying just that. They argue that our region should spend \$6 billion more -- roughly \$8,000 per household -- mainly to widen highways. They claim that billions of dollars in new highways, along with investing in some transit, will improve the regional economy.

Here's the rub: Everyone agrees that even if we followed this plan -- more than doubling the region's 20-year transportation investments from \$4 billion to \$10 billion -- congestion and travel times will still increase. The expanded budget would simply reduce the increase in congestion by 30 seconds. That's right: All of our financial liability goes up by billions of dollars and in return we get 30 seconds. The congestion report also shows two minutes' savings for the average truck trip. For \$6 billion.

The Cost of Congestion Study fails to acknowledge the elephant in the room. The biggest contributor to congestion in the Portland area is drive-alone trips of less than five miles. What's keeping our local distribution system from functioning efficiently isn't inadequate highways. It's you and me driving from place to place. And where are we going? Often, we're clogging the roadways just to go down the street to the grocery store or library. The smart investment to help freight move would focus on programs that give people better choices than driving alone.

The report does not appear to have sparked much interest in the larger business community, not to mention among voters -- most of us can spot a poor deal when we see it. For some perspective, consider the flip side: A recent North Carolina Department of Transportation study found that bicycle facilities returned \$9 in benefits for every dollar invested.

Our point is not that congestion isn't a problem, but that the "Six Billion Dollar Plan" is a fantasy whose time is past. Instead, we can live within our means, use technology and innovative partnerships to create more efficient transportation systems, allowing us to focus tax dollars on programs that will truly move the economy.

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