



WES Commuter Rail Expansion Summary of History, Reports, and Potential Next Steps

BACKGROUND¹

Beginning in the 1880s and into the early 1900s, rail was the main form of transportation throughout Oregon's Willamette Valley until its decline in the wake of the automobile and proliferation of macadam roads. Since the 1990s, there have been varying levels of interest in reinstating commuter rail service in Oregon and numerous studies were commissioned. By the mid-1990s, Washington County and the greater Portland metropolitan area began considering a commuter rail service that ultimately led to the creation of the TriMet Westside Express Service (WES) commuter rail line, which became operational in February 2009 after approximately 10 years of planning. Today, the WES is the only commuter rail service in Oregon, providing service between the Beaverton Transit Center and the Wilsonville Transit Center.

In 2009 the Oregon Legislature passed House Bill 2408, directing the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) to conduct a statewide rail study on the capacity, availability, and efficiency of rail transportation in Oregon. In response to the growing interest of extending the WES, House Bill 2408 required the report to include findings related to extending the WES commuter rail service from Wilsonville to Salem. ODOT issued the Oregon Rail Study in August 2010, and Appendix I of the study is the Wilsonville to Salem Commuter Rail Assessment.

Since the 2010 study was published, the Oregon Legislature has considered two pieces of legislation relating to the expansion of this commuter rail service. The 2013 Legislature considered House Bill 2338 which would have established a Task Force to further explore extending the WES commuter line from Wilsonville to Salem. The 2023 Legislature considered a similar measure, House Bill 2662. Neither of these measures passed.

CURRENT SERVICES

The TriMet WES commuter rail line serves Beaverton, Tigard, Tualatin, and Wilsonville. WES runs Monday – Friday during the morning and afternoon rush hours, with trains running every 45 minutes. The route provides commuter service with three stops between the Beaverton Transit Center and the Wilsonville WES Station. From the Wilsonville WES Station, commuters have two public transit options to Salem:

- Salem-Keizer Transit, Cherriots buses, provide transit service to Salem, Keizer and the Marion and Polk County region.
- South Metro Area Regional Transit (SMART) buses provide transit service between Wilsonville and Salem, as well as connections to Canby.

¹ This memo is intended as a summary of WES Commuter Rail Expansion analysis performed to date for purposes of sharing with interested legislative offices. This memo does not reflect the opinions, input, or positions of named partners.



OREGON RAIL STUDY

In response to legislative direction in House Bill 2408, ODOT reviewed six previous rail studies to collect an inventory of data and develop guidance for the Wilsonville to Salem Commuter Rail Assessment as part of the 2010 Oregon Rail Study. Evaluation of these studies identified five aspects of commuter rail that should be evaluated in any feasibility analysis to capture a complete picture of the opportunities and barriers (outreach to the railroad owners of track regarding right-of-way and trackage rights, data collection, operating plan assumptions, data analysis, and feasibility assessment.)

WILSONVILLE TO SALEM COMMUTER RAIL ASSESSMENT: KEY FINDINGS

The Oregon Rail Study focused on the identified five components to assess extending the commuter rail from Wilsonville to Salem along 29 miles of the alignment of the former Oregon Electric Railway (OE), which was an electrified railway that began operating between Salem and Portland in 1908 and was extended to Eugene in 1912. Evaluation of these components led to the following key findings:

Outreach to the Railroad Owners: The assessment identified three entities that have a vested interest along the OE alignment from Wilsonville to Salem:

- The State of Oregon owns the right-of-way real estate and bridges between Wilsonville and Perkins Street Road crossing north of Keizer.
- BNSF Railway Co. (BNSF) owns the track and right of way from Perkins Street to Salem and Eugene.
- Portland & Western Railroad (PNWR) owns the track and common carrier franchise on the ODOT right-of-way and leases the BNSF-owned railroad south to Eugene.

Importantly, consent by PNWR and BNSF to allow passenger rail on their systems is necessary in order to extend the WES commuter rail line.

Capacity analysis and land use: The assessment found that track conditions along the OE alignment between the WES terminus in Wilsonville and Salem would need substantial rebuilding to support a passenger rail service and the existing right-of-way is large enough for two mainline tracks. The assessment also highlights the Willamette River Bridge near Wilsonville and the 570-foot Lake Labish concrete bridge near Keizer city are part of the OE alignment and hosts a single track.

The assessment found rail capacity would need to be expanded to accommodate an expansion of commuter rail service on the OE alignment. More specifically, additional passing siding and/or double tracking would be needed at multiple locations to allow freight and commuter trains to pass each other.

The OE alignment passes through diverse landscapes and would require land use plans between Wilsonville and Salem. For example, the OE alignment passes public areas in Salem that would require mitigation measures to address community impacts from an extension of the commuter rail line.



Operating Plan Assumptions: The assessment identified the following major cost elements needed for the extension:

- Train equipment.
- Potential new stations at Woodburn, Keizer, and Salem.
- Maintenance and support facilities.
- Signals/communications and crossing warning upgrades.
- Track upgrade and/or replacement.
- Passing sidings and double track.
- Implementing a “quiet zone” through Salem.

Project costs: As of 2009, the feasibility assessment estimated a capital cost of \$327 to \$387 million and operating costs of \$5.5 million to \$6.9 million+ per year. Only adjusting the 2009 estimated costs to reflect 2023 dollars, the estimated inflated capital cost is \$565 million to \$668 million with annual operating costs of \$8 million to \$10.1 million.

Importantly, this estimate accounts for the cost of the project if construction began in 2023, and thereafter the costs are likely to rise. This inflation-adjusted number also reflects assumptions included in the 2010 study. Recognizing many variables exist for a project of this scope and scale, a clear finance plan for capital and operating costs is vital to moving the project forward.

FTA considerations: The assessment identified the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) as the most likely source of federal funding for a commuter rail expansion project. For example, FTA funds made up 40% of the funding for the WES line. Requests for FTA funding compete on a national scale, and the assessment found in consultation with the railroads, TriMet, and Washington County, that creative funding solutions and strong leadership is essential to successfully presenting a funding proposal to the FTA. Projects included on a state's priority list help garner credibility and strengthen finance plans. In this case, the state could consider adding the WES commuter rail extension project to the State Rail Plan's Rail Needs Inventory for the purpose of elevating state funding requests and an FTA funding proposal.

Ridership and congestion projections: The preliminary analysis projected the rail extension has the potential to attract 3,000 to 4,000 riders per day and reduce congestion up to 3% on the I-5 during the morning and evening peak commuting periods by 2030. The assessment indicated the overall travel improvements on I-5 and OR 99E and OR 99W would be very limited and the extension of the commuter rail would need to be more thoroughly evaluated to quantify reduced commute delays compared to not extending the commuter rail service.

CONCLUSION

The assessment ultimately concluded extending the WES commuter rail from Wilsonville to Salem is technically feasible, but faces many operational, financial, and political challenges.

Barriers to Expansion

The assessment identified the following barriers to extending the commuter rail:



- **Funding:** A clear financing plan for the project does not currently exist and funding sources haven't been identified for initial and ongoing capital and operational costs.
- **Right-of-way and trackage rights:** Approval and cooperation from PNWR and BNSF would be required to expand the WES commuter rail line.
- **Governance:** Extension of the WES commuter rail line to Salem would involve many jurisdictions, including the State of Oregon, Washington, Marion, and Clackamas counties; the cities of Wilsonville, Donald, Woodburn, Keizer, and Salem; the PNWR and BNSF railroads; and the transit agencies throughout the corridor – TriMet, SMART, Cherriots, Canby Area Transit (CAT), and Yamhill County Transit Area (YCTA). Collaboration among these entities is essential to extending the commuter rail.
- **Ownership and operations:** It is not clear who would own and operate the commuter rail line between Wilsonville and Salem. A commuter network linking Portland, Wilsonville and Salem would also connect the transit districts of TriMet, SMART and Cherriots, assuming coordination among all transit stations and an operating authority. Considering TriMet currently operates the WES line and has jurisdictional limitations, their input is critical.
- **Freight coordination and potential terminus locations:** Potential land use changes to support a commuter rail may be incompatible with existing freight rail operations and commuters along the existing PNWR line.
- **Competitive FTA funding:** The assessment's forecast of moderate ridership on the extension could make receiving FTA funding more difficult against other commuter rail projects nationwide.

Outstanding Questions to Consider

- Are PNWR and BNSF open to allowing a commuter rail from Wilsonville to Salem on their rail systems?
- Is TriMet open to extending the WES commuter line?
- What are the potential founding sources available for initial and on-going capital and operational costs?
- What entity will operate the commuter rail line?
- Which entity would be responsible for project implementation and ongoing operations for the commuter rail line?
- Will new stations be built along the Wilsonville to Salem line? Which counties/cities are optimal locations?
- Are there any existing transit services that could be interrupted by a commuter rail line from Wilsonville to Salem?
- Can the existing maintenance facility at Wilsonville be enlarged or would a new one be required? Where should it be located?
- Would the Willamette River Bridge on the OE alignment require upgrading for the purpose of expanding the commuter rail line?
- Would the WES commuter line extension be considered a statewide priority project?



Recommended Next Steps

- Consider completion of a gap analysis of the 2010 Oregon Rail Study to assess any substantial changes in the study's assumptions and findings from 2010 to 2023 and determine whether a new Wilsonville to Salem Commuter Rail Assessment is necessary.
- Establish a Work Group to address outstanding questions and develop a financial plan with key stakeholders, such as: Washington, Marion, and Clackamas counties; the cities of Wilsonville, Donald, Woodburn, Keizer, and Salem; ODOT; the PNWR and BNSF railroads; and the transit agencies throughout the corridor - TriMet, SMART, Cherriots, CAT, and YCTA.

Sources:

- [2010 Oregon Rail Study, Chapter 6](#)
- [Oregon-Rail-Study-2010.pdf](#)
- [HB2408 \(oregonlegislature.gov\)](#)
- [HB2338 2013 Regular Session - Oregon Legislative Information System \(oregonlegislature.gov\)](#)
- [HB2662 2023 Regular Session - Oregon Legislative Information System \(oregonlegislature.gov\)](#)
- [WES Commuter Rail \(trimet.org\)](#)