

# MAX: A Transportation Transformation

The Portland region enjoys a national reputation for livability, but it could have easily followed the path of other urban areas that were carved apart to make way for the automobile. In fact, that was the plan.

In 1969, the Portland-Vancouver Metropolitan Transportation Study called for 54 new highways in the region, including the eight-lane Mt. Hood Freeway that was set to cut Southeast Portland in two. Bold leadership and public resistance to the freeway sparked the light rail concept.

## The Turning Point

Planned as a five-mile stretch between Interstate 5 and the forthcoming Multnomah County segment of Interstate 205, the Mt. Hood Freeway was set to sever neighborhoods along the Southeast Division/Powell corridor. The freeway project involved relocating 1,700 homes and displacing 200 businesses. Nine elementary schools and four local high schools would have been impacted by a reduction in population and shifts in enrollment. Pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods such as Hawthorne, Mount Tabor and Ladd's Addition would have suffered from increased vehicle traffic, noise and pollution.

Elected officials from the local to federal level, along with active citizens, drove the effort to change the course of the region's future.

**1972** — Governor Tom McCall created a citizens' task force on transportation to examine transportation alternatives in Portland.

**1973** — Outraged SE Portland residents filed a complaint in U.S. District Court that temporarily stopped the Mt. Hood Freeway project, pending additional corridor studies and an environmental impact statement.

**1974** — Portland City Council voted against the Mt. Hood Freeway.

**1975** — Federal funds to build the Mt. Hood Freeway and another abandoned freeway, Interstate 505, were withdrawn and reallocated to other transportation improvements.

## Making the Connection

Along with the opposition to the Mt. Hood Freeway, other issues influenced the region's transportation choices. With increasing traffic congestion on the east side, Portland's air quality violated Federal Clean Air standards. The Legislature mandated a sharp reduction of pollutant emissions to safeguard Oregon's air quality. Also, gas shortages caused by the OPEC oil embargo caused many to question the wisdom of heavy reliance on freeways.

Transportation alternatives such as light rail held promise. After extensive studies, local and regional agencies agreed to build a 15-mile light rail line between Gresham and downtown Portland. Former freeway funds also paid to widen a 4.5-mile section of I-84 from four to six lanes, and improve many regional roads.

The innovative idea of a light rail system met a mixed reception. It took years to resolve all of the political, logistical and financial obstacles. While light rail lines operated in Europe, Portland was among the first cities in the U.S. to install a line. By the time Eastside MAX opened in 1986, it was only the third modern light rail line in the U.S. and fifth in North America.

During the three-day opening celebration 200,000 people packed MAX trains day and night. In its 20-year history, 215 million trips have been taken on MAX between Portland and Gresham.

## Creating Communities

Before MAX construction began in March 1982, all 20 station areas were rezoned to promote transit-oriented



*Pioneer Place opened in 1990, with MAX light rail bringing riders just steps from the front door.*



See where it takes you.

development. Local governments saw that light rail was more than just a transportation option. It was a catalyst for helping to create and enhance communities. Working hand-in-hand with land-use policies, station-area development was focused on pedestrian-friendly, ground-floor retail development with more density around light rail stations. Developers liked the attractiveness and permanence of light rail when making investments.

### Transit-Oriented Development

Since the decision to build, more than \$4.7 billion in development has occurred within walking distance of the Portland-to-Gresham stations. This includes at least 1,900 single-family units and 10,500 multiple housing units.

The Lloyd District has been transformed around the MAX line with new office buildings, the Rose Garden arena and the Oregon Convention Center. The Convention Center paid the local share for the MAX station outside its front entrance and plaza.



*The Oregon Convention Center was sited across the street from the MAX line, with easy connections to nearby hotels, restaurants and downtown Portland.*

The route alignment in Gresham skirted the heart of downtown. Once the MAX line opened, the city of Gresham initiated an urban renewal program focused on buildings and empty lots near light rail stations. Their



*SW 1st Avenue (left) in the early 1980s, and after the opening of MAX in 1986.*

signature projects include the new City Hall across from MAX and the nearby Gresham Civic Neighborhood, with pedestrian-friendly shopping and housing that will soon have its own MAX station. The transit-oriented development has continued as the MAX line has extended throughout the region.

Recognized as part of a balanced transportation system, light rail enhances livability by offering high-quality transit service, takes cars off roads, extends the life of roadways and helps protect air quality. Combined with land-use planning, MAX is a proven attractor for transit-oriented development and a key to vibrant communities.

### Making Tracks Toward Tomorrow

MAX started as a line between Gresham and Portland. It's now a growing 44-mile system that connects Beaverton, Hillsboro, the Portland International Airport and North/Northeast Portland. TriMet's fifth light rail extension is set to open in 2009. The 8.3-mile I-205/Portland Mall MAX Light Rail Project will bring light rail to Clackamas County for the first time and add a new alignment through downtown Portland. The new alignment through downtown also accommodates future rail extensions to Milwaukie, Vancouver and southwest Portland.