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## **Portland metro area needs regional transportation authority to sort out mess, new report says**

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The Sellwood Bridge has faced weight limits for years to cope with its deteriorating condition.

The region's transportation system is a bureaucratic and political mess -- allowing the Sellwood Bridge to deteriorate

while suburban pet projects like the Newberg-Dundee bypass attract favor, says a new **City Club** report.

The report calls for more regional cooperation, specifically by empowering the **Metro regional government** to own and operate the Willamette River bridges and major urban highways such as Portland's 82nd Avenue that are controlled by the Oregon Department of Transportation.

"Instead of a considered approach to the overall transportation system, there has been a focus on individual transportation projects, and a balkanization of transportation decision-making," the report concludes.

The study is likely to boost efforts led by **Multnomah County** Chairman Ted Wheeler and Clackamas County Commissioner Lynn Peterson to find a regional solution to bridge funding, but also could ignite a backlash by people who are already suspicious of Metro.

Metro is in charge of regional planning, including transportation, but has a more limited role than the report suggests. The agency also operates parks and facilities such as the convention center in Portland and the Portland Center for Performing Arts. In addition, it regulates solid waste and runs the Oregon Zoo.

The City Club is a civic organization that routinely researches and takes position on public issues in Portland. Its recommendations include:

ODOT should give Metro the money that the state agency spends on highways and bridges in the region, other than freeways.

The Legislature should direct ODOT to give Metro the transportation money now distributed to cities and counties in the region.

Metro should have the power to impose taxes, tolls or fees needed for transportation, and as Metro exercises this new power, all local fees, fuel taxes, bond levies or street utility fees for transportation should be phased out.

All non-freeway bridges across the Willamette, Clackamas and Tualatin Rivers -- other than the Steel Bridge, which is owned by Union Pacific Railroad -- should be planned, owned and operated by a regional bridge authority established by Metro.

ODOT should establish a new Area Commission on Transportation that would include Metro and Columbia and Yamhill counties.

The report doesn't recommend that Metro take over TriMet, the regional transit district.

David Bragdon, president of the Metro Council, welcomed the recommendations, but noted they will be tough to accomplish. "Bureaucratic turf considerations often trump rationality in delivering public services," he said.

Bragdon noted that a recent Metro audit found that fragmentation of transportation decision-making led to a lack of accountability.

The club's report detailed three projects that demonstrate what's wrong with the current system -- the Sellwood Bridge, the Newberg-Dundee bypass and the Columbia River Crossing.

Proposed funding for a new Sellwood Bridge would require residents of Multnomah County and Portland to pay more than 10 times as much as residents of Clackamas County, who use the bridge three times as much, the report says.

"The case of the Sellwood Bridge illustrates what happens when the users of a transportation facility are different from the people who are responsible for maintaining it," the report says.

Funding for the Newberg-Dundee bypass, a project long sought by Yamhill County officials, was approved by the Legislature last year, sidestepping the state's normal process.

"This degree of legislative intervention in the prioritization of transportation projects is unprecedented and controversial," the report says. "It was widely viewed as a concession to Sen. Larry George, who represents Newberg, and a few other Republican senators in exchange for their agreement not block a fuel tax increase."

And the continuing war of words over a new freeway bridge over the Columbia River after years of work illustrates the conflicting politics of Portland and southwest Washington, particularly regarding tolls and light rail.

"The different viewpoints north and south of the river could still kill, stall or downsize the project because the federal government, which will be an important contributor of funding, is not expected to proceed in the face of a local

dispute," the report says.

The report's recommendations would take a combination of legislative action and Metro charter changes.

**-- James Mayer**

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