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Transportation: repairing a vital link

By The Oregonian Editorial Board

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The Metro regional government has a hodgepodge of duties, many of which it has acquired because no one else wanted them. This week, a report released by the City Club of Portland recommended a startling upgrade.

Metro, remember, has a president and six councilors elected to represent 1.5 million people living in three counties and 25 cities. And it coordinates land-use planning and owns greenspaces and parks, as well as the Oregon Zoo and the Oregon Convention Center.

But could it now be time to entrust Metro with a huge responsibility -- transportation spending -- that many other agencies actually do covet, and yet that none is able to do very well? (They don't do it well because each one only oversees its own jurisdiction, and none oversees the region.) The logical maestro to oversee regional transportation financing and choices, the City Club report suggested, is Metro.

To be clear, not even the City Club itself has endorsed the findings in this provocative report, "Moving Forward: A Better Way to Govern Regional Transportation." The club will vote on the report next week.

But it's fair to say that the initial response to the report from the public has been along the lines of "Hell, no." If it's true that more people have warmed to Metro over the past decade, that doesn't mean they're anywhere close to embracing such a radical restructuring. As Metro president David Bragdon told The Oregonian's James Mayer on Wednesday, "Bureaucratic turf considerations often trump rationality in delivering public services."

That's an understatement. But let's acknowledge, too, that objections may not all stem from turf. Still, it would be worthwhile for people in this region to actually read the City Club's report before they rush to any conclusions.

Today, Metro controls somewhere between \$23 million and \$37 million a year in transportation spending, which is only a small fraction of the transportation dollars spent in this region. The Oregon Department of Transportation, in contrast, spends about \$200 million annually on road-related projects here, including freeways, bridges and some local streets.

The upshot, at times, can be a fundamental mismatch. Take, for instance, the Sellwood Bridge -- Multnomah County only wishes someone would take the dilapidated Sellwood off its hands. Although Multnomah County owns the bridge, and a financing plan for replacing it calls for Multnomah County taxpayers to shoulder much of the burden of replacing it, Clackamas County residents actually drive over the Sellwood three times more.

That's unfair.

But the point isn't that Clackamas County should own the bridge. The Sellwood is a regional asset and it should be owned, as Multnomah County Chairman Ted Wheeler has insisted for some time, by some sort of regional transportation authority. But how to organize that?

The City Club report suggests that Metro is the logical place to begin, but that it will need more money and more real clout -- including the power to impose taxes, tolls and transportation fees -- to make any real changes.

For all our big talk about collaboration and regionalism, our bureaucratic synapses often misfire and our policy choices often prove incoherent in the realm of transportation. But the "platform" to coordinate it may already be under our feet; we're just not taking full advantage of it.

There's a lot to digest in this City Club report, but it is certainly correct about one thing: Metro is an underachiever.

Our region has barely begun to tap its potential.

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