



## The Oregonian

### Milwaukie leaders, residents warm to light-rail proposal

**MAX - With new city leadership, shifting demographics and improved route plans, the once-unpopular idea is now progressing**

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After a decade of controversy and rejection, MAX to Milwaukie is back on track.

And this time, officials won't be greeted with "pitchforks at the door," says Metro Councilor Brian Newman.

Southeast Portland residents have long sought light rail, but Clackamas County scuttled the idea twice. In Milwaukie, the mayor and two councilors were recalled for supporting light rail. Opponents focused on the route, or the proposed tax increases, but they also objected to Portland-style urban life, complete with mass transit and high-density housing encroaching on their community.

It's different this time around. New leaders want light rail.

"I feel we are farther along than we've ever been," said Milwaukie Mayor Jim Bernard, who appeared at a recent TriMet board meeting to make sure the Milwaukie MAX line wasn't overlooked in all the buzz over a possible eastside streetcar line.

Opposition has melted because planners came up with a better project that doesn't cut through historic neighborhoods, Bernard said. The community has changed as well.

Bernard, who operates the city's downtown farmers market, sees a demographic shift in his customers each Sunday. "They're younger, they use mass transit, there's more higher income levels, they are interested in natural foods," he said.

Other signs: The trendy Waldorf School moved to town, bringing with it high-income families. And new housing is being built downtown.

Some route issues remain, and the siting of a new MAX-only rail bridge over the Willamette River between OMSI and the South Waterfront area is still up in the air.

But the project could be built as soon as 2011, at a cost of about \$850 million.

The next step is a Metro study beginning in April to update an alignment approved in 2003, including analysis of the 6.5-mile project's ridership, economic development opportunities and environmental impact.

The project began life in the mid-1990s as TriMet sought a south to north MAX line connecting Clackamas and Clark counties.

In 1994, TriMet voters approved a bond measure for the Oregon part of the project, but Clark County voters rejected funding for their part. In 1996, Oregon voters turned down lottery-backed bonds for the project. In 1998, TriMet voters turned down yet another funding package.

After the 1998 loss, Metro and TriMet focused on expanding light rail in Portland, where voters supported it, and studying everything but light rail to improve transit in Clackamas County.

But light rail remained alive. In 2001, the Milwaukie Neighborhood Association came up with a plan to support light rail if it avoided damaging neighborhoods and met other conditions.

Officials were skeptical. Metro Councilor Newman said both TriMet General Manager Fred Hansen and Metro Presiding Officer Mike Burton weren't sure they wanted to go through another bruising light-rail fight.

The current proposal was approved by Metro, TriMet and local governments involved in 2003, without the acrimony of past efforts.

The project is not funded, but officials don't expect to seek a tax increase from voters. They are eyeing \$250 million in bonding capacity that will become available in 2009 when the lottery bonds for the westside MAX will be paid off. That money could go a long way toward meeting the local match required for federal funding.

The first phase, extending MAX along Interstate 205 to Clackamas Town Center, is under construction.

Milwaukie is next. The plan calls for a line that would begin at Portland State University where the new transit mall line will end, cross the river south of OMSI, and head along Southeast 17th Avenue and McLoughlin Boulevard to Milwaukie. It would then go east from North Main Street to the Tillamook branch railroad tracks, ending at Lake Road. The plan features a large park-and-ride lot and 11 stations.

Opposition from North Main Street industrial leaders has prompted study of an alternative route farther east, with a terminus at Kellogg Lake. But officials dropped the lake site because it was donated to the city 15 years ago for exclusive use as a park. Officials also are studying extending the line beyond Lake Road.

The river crossing is the other big unresolved issue.

A lot has changed in the South Waterfront since the original bridge alignment, and planners want to make sure the bridge makes the right connection with a planned major expansion of Oregon Health & Science University.

Transit advocate Jim Howell says the new bridge is a bad idea. Howell prefers to keep light rail on the east side of Portland, with major stations at the Hawthorne and Morrison bridge heads, and at the Rose Quarter.

He says it would be cheaper and provide faster service than building a new bridge and sending trains into downtown.

But officials argue that forcing commuters to transfer to a bus or MAX at the Rose Quarter to get downtown would discourage ridership. The new bridge also could carry the proposed eastside streetcar, which could help share the cost.

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