



Office of Mayor Ted Wheeler  
City of Portland

Testimony to the Senate Democrats' Special Committee on the Climate Crisis

July 17, 2019

Dear Chair Schatz and Members of this Committee:

My name is Ted Wheeler, and I am proud to serve as the Mayor of Portland, Oregon. I appreciate the opportunity to provide this testimony on behalf of the City of Portland, and the members of our community.

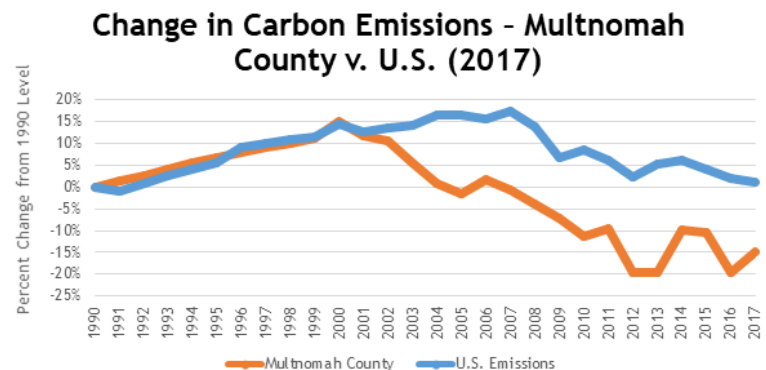
I want to thank the Chair and his colleagues for convening this panel today. The climate crisis is undoubtedly the greatest threat we face in this generation, and the leadership you have taken to create the Committee is essential.

### **Portland's Climate Action Story**

While the challenge of climate change is more urgent than ever, Portland's response is not new. Portland was the first city in the U.S. to adopt a climate action plan in 1993. We have been earnestly tackling climate change for 25 years. Here are the lessons that we have learned and where we need to go to meet the needs of our communities and our planet.

#### **1. Climate action creates prosperous communities.**

The first lesson we've learned is that taking bold actions to address climate change is inextricably linked to creating healthy, vibrant and prosperous communities. In Portland, while our population and the number of jobs increased, our carbon emissions are down. As of 2017, Portland has reduced per person carbon emissions by 38% below 1990 levels. During that same time, we have welcomed 38% more residents to our city and created 34% more jobs. These numbers say we are headed in the right direction, but we still have ways to go.



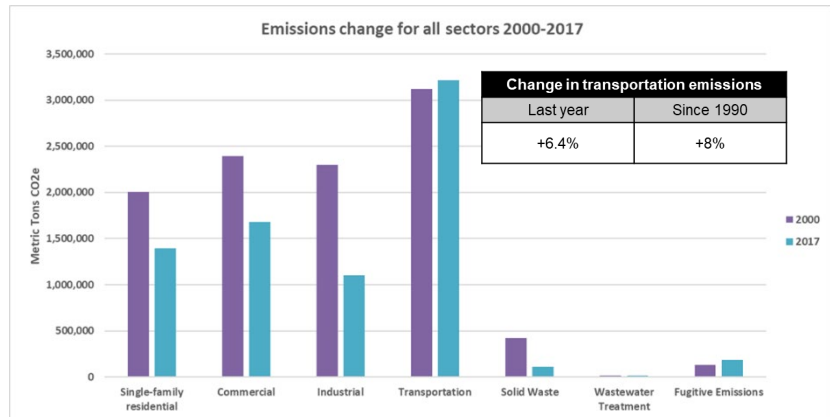
- i. The investments that have helped reduce carbon emissions are also what make people want to live, work and play in Portland. These investments include creating walkable neighborhoods with shopping, restaurants and parks; investing in transit, sidewalks and bikeways; protecting and restoring natural areas; and making our homes and buildings cheaper to operate and more comfortable.
- ii. Portland has demonstrated that climate action and creating a vibrant community and robust economy go hand in hand. This same trend can be seen among the other leading climate vanguard cities around the world.
- iii. The classic trope that climate action is bad for the economy or bad for jobs simply isn't true. In reality, failing to take meaningful action to address climate change is what is bad for the economy, and bad for our communities.

## **2. We must take stronger action to avert harm.**

The second lesson learned is that time is of the essence. Our efforts to tackle climate change are more important now than they have ever been. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report says that we have the next decade to act to prevent exacerbated harm from climate change. We are at a crossroads and we cannot continue down the path of incremental changes or actions. We are out of time and we need to take big, bold steps at both the local and national level.

- i. Despite our successes in Portland, we are finding our carbon emission reductions have plateaued, and we're now seeing emissions from the transportation sector moving in the wrong direction – up 8% above 1990 levels. That isn't unique to Portland – it is a national trend as well – transportation emissions are growing. As our population continues to grow and more people move through our region, we need to move people and goods more efficiently. While fuel efficiency and the increasing number of electric vehicles help, we will have to reduce the amount we each drive alone to move the dial on carbon emissions, while also meeting the mobility needs of our communities.
- ii. Today nearly 60% of Portlanders drive alone to work. If that percentage were to hold steady through 2035, we would see unsustainably high levels of traffic congestion, pollution and share of household spending on things like fuel and vehicle expenses. Instead, we need to make walking, biking, and using public transit safer and more attractive to maximize the use of our limited road space and help the entire road system work more efficiently. Switching to riding public transportation is one of the most effective actions individuals can take to reduce their carbon footprint. In the Portland region, there is 60% less carbon emitted for each mile taken on public transit, compared to driving alone. This carbon reduction benefit will continue to increase as our transit system gets to diesel-free by 2040 by phasing in electric buses. Prioritizing space on our roads for buses will help move more people more reliably while making less of an impact on our environment. It's a win-win.

iii. Because of the recent increase in transportation carbon emissions, Portland is doubling-down on reducing those emissions, working hard to make biking, walking and taking transit the easiest, fastest and most convenient choice for getting around our city. The City is investing in transit-only lanes and other public investments to make our bus service faster, cleaner and more reliable, with the goal to increase ridership. Unfortunately, buses and streetcars, along with all the people on them, are increasingly stuck in traffic and getting slower. Transit delay and unreliability shrinks people's access to opportunity. It also wastes scarce transit operating resources, with our regional transit agency estimating annual delay-related costs of \$14 million that could otherwise be spent improving service. The city is growing and demand to move people is increasing. High-ridership transit is the most efficient, equitable, and sustainable way to move large numbers of people in scarce urban space. We need to more than double transit ridership for the commute trip between now and 2035 to meet our 25% transit mode share goal.



a. To help meet these goals, the City has started by targeting the areas of greatest transit delay and transit service levels. Central City in Motion is Portland's plan for strategic investments in our streets to create a smart, 21st century transportation system in the central city. The Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) will complete three Central City in Motion transit investments over the next 18 months, adding 1.54 miles of bus-only lanes in the Central City. These projects will provide more reliable bus rides for the 75,000+ riders who use these lanes every day (40% of the daily rides in our transit system). The impact won't just be felt in downtown, but across the entire bus network as vehicles move more easily through the central city. The Central City in Motion projects will also



**Cars:** 28 people / city block



**Buses:** 225 people / city block



**Walking:** 1000 people / city block

improve bicycle safety by adding dedicated, protected bike lanes in several central city locations.

- b. Beyond the central city, PBOT is studying how best to roll out transit priority investments across Portland's most congested corridors through the Rose Lane project vision. If we dedicate lanes to bus travel across our transit priority network, improvements will be felt across the system, making transit a more attractive and reliable option for more people. By the end of 2020, we will have designed the Rose Lane vision and be ready to implement this bold vision for enhanced transit across our city.
  
- iv. Congestion is a hidden tax, with impacts on the economy, public health and the climate. Communities across the country have discovered that they can't build their way out of congestion by expanding highways, which has instead led to more vehicle miles traveled and greater emissions. In contrast, we have seen the data that congestion pricing can work – reducing traffic, carbon emissions, and supporting public health – and we are exploring ways to reduce congestion by utilizing pricing in a way that promotes equitable mobility. This means investing funds generated through pricing strategies for transportation improvements that advance racial equity and climate action. Pricing strategies must be carefully designed so the cost-burden is not disproportionately felt by Portlanders with lower levels of wealth or income, and we cannot advance this conversation without our key stakeholders around the table. To refine and advance our approach, we are simultaneously engaged in three pricing-related initiatives, including:
  - a. The potential of using tactical City of Portland-only pricing policies on City streets and infrastructure to advance key strategic goals, such as policies and programs that support shared rides, high value trips (efficient trips with a high amount of passengers/cargo per trip) and complement public transit.
  - b. The Portland Metro Area Value Pricing project, led by Oregon Department of Transportation, which is exploring the potential of adding congestion pricing tolls on I-5 and I-205, the two largest interstate highway facilities in the region.
  - c. Regional policy analysis, led by our Oregon Metro MPO, to understand the potential impacts of different types of regional pricing policies, including cordon-based pricing, vehicle miles traveled-based pricing, and pricing on the regional freeway system.

### **3. People-centered solutions are essential to meeting the challenge**

The third lesson we learned is that technical solutions are only going to get us so far. Electric buses, solar panels, bike lanes, home insulation – those are important pieces of work to advance, but we can't get to the carbon reductions we need if we stop there. Climate change

has become a climate justice crisis. Displacement, housing affordability issues and disproportionate health outcomes are tightly linked to the extractive culture that contributes to climate change. Climate action is about the people. We need to put the focus on improving the health and well-being of our communities at the center of our climate work. If we can achieve that, then we'll be better able to find climate solutions that work for everyone, which means we can finally find a way to get to the massive reductions we need to see. Center the people, and success will follow.

- i. In 2018, Portland voters overwhelmingly passed a ballot initiative to create a new \$50-70 million/year revenue stream for green jobs and healthy homes.
- ii. The initiative was designed specifically to ensure that Portland's Climate Action Plan is implemented in a manner that supports social, economic and environmental benefits for all Portlanders, including the development of a diverse and well-trained workforce and contractor pool in the field of clean energy.
- iii. The Portland Clean Energy Community Benefits Fund offers a community-led vision, grounded in justice and equity, that builds citywide resilience and opportunity. The measure was passed by a margin of 65 percent, making it Oregon's first-ever environmental initiative created and led by communities of color.
- iv. This effort was successful in large part because it coupled the technical solutions for reducing climate pollution with delivering community benefits like good paying jobs, affordable transportation and comfortable homes.
- v. It's Portland's version of the Green New Deal, and it has created a model for how we can transform our climate work into the future.

### **Federal Leadership Opportunities**

The cities before you today are serious about tackling the climate crisis. But, climate change cannot be solved by local governments in isolation. Businesses, residents, institutions and non-profit organizations all have essential roles to play. Cities across the U.S. are doing their part – big, small, urban, rural. However, our collective success – or failure – will largely be determined by the action – or inaction – taken at the federal level.

We see three clear areas that U.S Government can support cities in tackling climate change while increasing the health and prosperity of our communities.

**Federal Support – Ask #1** The City continues to suffer from a severe shortage of transportation funding, even as local voters and state governments have recently increased transportation funding. This shortage is shared by local jurisdictions throughout the United States. A strong federal partner is crucial to the development of a multimodal transportation system that promotes safe mobility, supports the economy, and protects the environment. To ensure the federal government can play its key partner role, we implore

the US Congress to increase the federal gas tax, which has not been raised since 1993. In addition, key funding priorities include the FTA's Capital Investment Grant Programs, including the New Starts/Small Starts programs, and the multimodal BUILD program. We need more sustainable long-term funding strategies. As the efficiency of vehicle fleets increases, gas tax revenue diminishes as fuel consumption decreases. In response, Oregon has been a leader in piloting a transition to a Vehicle Miles Traveled fee system.

**Federal Support – Ask #2** Remove tolling restrictions on federally-funded roadways (specifically the statutory language in 23 U.S.C. 129(a)) to create a robust set of tools for state and local jurisdictions to maintain and manage the transportation system. Tolling can generate revenue for maintenance, while also being used to manage demand to ensure existing facilities are used as efficiently as possible. While some exceptions were created through the MAP-21 authorization bill, the process remains unnecessarily restrictive, given the current federal underinvestment in the transportation system.

**Federal Support – Ask #3** Advance earnest and open discussion around the important concepts in the Green New Deal. With your leadership, we can flip the narrative from “We can’t do that!” to “How could we do that?”:

- ✓ How could we create millions of good, high-wage jobs as we transition to a low-carbon economy?
- ✓ How could we spur massive growth in clean and energy efficient manufacturing?
- ✓ How could we invest in sustainable farming and land use practices that increase soil health, sequester carbon and ensure universal access to healthy food?
- ✓ How could we overhaul the transportation system in the U.S. to enable clean, affordable and accessible public transportation and reduce congestion?

Those are outcomes that Portland is seeking. Those are worthwhile and necessary discussions – and actions – that we need to be having in all communities, and at all levels of government. We’re having them in Portland, we need them to be happening in D.C. too. We stand ready as partners, willing to share our successes and learn from others’. The climate crisis presents an existential risk to us all, even as it presents unparalleled opportunities to create a more inclusive, just and prosperous society for all Americans.

I again want to thank the Chair for this opportunity to share our work with you today, and for your and your colleagues’ leadership on this critical issue. I look forward to your questions.