

DRAFT

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for the opportunity to review and provide comments on the draft 2024-2029 Capital Facilities Plan (CFP). It is an honor and a privilege to represent the interests of the citizens of Olympia who wish to improve the safety and accessibility of the city through modes of transport other than individual automobiles.

The CFP does the hard work of aligning the ideals of the Comprehensive Plan and the projects in the Transportation Master Plan with the current budgetary resources. As the city feels the effects of climate change and continued population growth, the need for a transportation system designed for pedestrians, cyclists, and public transit is becoming more urgent every day.

OVERVIEW

First, we are glad that none of the CFP projects call for expanded roads, which would create induced demand*.

We are concerned that the projects in the CFP perpetuate an automobile-centric design philosophy. Even if all of the 20 year projects listed in the CFP were completed this year, the city would have a transportation network overwhelmingly focused on moving and housing cars, not people. We believe that for the city to achieve its goals, it will need to take a different approach than what is laid out in the CFP as written.

Thesis Statement: To that end, this committee calls upon the city to holistically align transportation projects with the Comprehensive Plan and CFP goals, make public health and safety a top priority, and establish metrics that directly confront the root causes of automobile dependence in the built environment.

PLAN ALIGNMENT

In reading through the CFP, we have noticed that goals associated with projects only come from within their specific area (parks projects only connect to parks goals, transportation projects only connect to transportation goals, etc.). Since transportation is the network that connects our community, this apparent siloing results in a skewed prioritization of projects. Transportation has an outsized impact on many of the goals in the Comprehensive Plan, but there appears to be no connection between those goals and transportation projects. For example:

- GR9: Olympians enjoy lifelong happiness and wellness. Research shows that an active lifestyle has a major impact on health, to the point that a recent study found that people who commute by bike have a 47% lower risk of early death than the general population [1]. No intervention by the city would have a bigger impact on health than making active transportation possible, practical, and attractive.
- GN5: Ground and surface waters are protected from land uses and activities that harm water quality and quantity. Any oil, grease, tire particles, or brake dust from a car will eventually end up in our ground and surface water. Protecting those waters is essential, but so long as we have a transportation system that requires us to emit these pollutants to meet our basic needs, any work that we do will be limited to mitigation. Reducing the reliance on

* See Glossary for definitions of jargon

private automobiles is a way to address these threats to our water resources at the source rather than asking future generations to clean up after us.

- GE3: A vital downtown provides a strong center for Olympia's economy. The design of our roads downtown makes the area a place to travel through, not to. Although we recognize that the location of downtown requires a major through-route connecting the east and west sides of the city, we also note the vibrant city center that appears when parts of it are closed to automobile traffic, such as during Artswalk. There is no better investment that could be made to Olympia's downtown than to reduce the number of cars there.

It is our considered opinion that the CFP would look very different if it took a systems thinking approach to the goals laid out in the Comprehensive Plan and scored projects holistically, and would have much better outcomes for the city and its constituents. Private automobiles are the root cause of many of our issues, and interventions that fail to take that into account will only deal with symptoms, not causes.

Recommendation: Re-assess and re-score transportation projects using all goals in the CFP and Comprehensive Plan, not just section-specific goals.

SAFETY

While not in the scope of this CFP, the committee recommends a reassessment of the city's Safety Plan. The Plan shows the highest concentration of pedestrian- and cyclist-involved collisions in the downtown core, but instead of concluding that the downtown core is unsafe, it focuses on single intersections, none of which have more than 1 or 2 incidents in the downtown core. It is clear that the core is unsafe and in need of major replanning to address safety and transportation needs.

Recommendation: Reassessment of the city's Safety Plan, approaching the downtown core as a single zone. Inclusion of improvements that consider a picture larger than single intersections, such as pedestrian-only zones or dramatic traffic-calming measures. Such measures could include road diets* or converting one-way streets to two-way streets. This approach improves safety by slowing down traffic, reducing collisions, and making streets more accessible for pedestrians and cyclists.

Increasing the real and perceived safety of non-motorized transit increases adoption of non-motorized transit. Therefore safety features that are physical barriers, not just paint lines, are essential to the wide adoption of bicycle and pedestrian transit by the public.

Recommendation: Increase the number of physically protected or entirely separate bike lanes and pedestrian paths.

Sidewalk conditions in many areas of the city are impassable by people using mobility devices and hazardous for all pedestrians. This has serious implications for quality of life and pose risk to the already-vulnerable populations.

Recommendation: Prioritize sidewalk maintenance. Develop an approach that addresses sidewalk deficiencies that are the responsibility of private property owners.

METRICS AND MEASUREMENT

The city should employ metrics that will be evaluated over time and in a manner consistent with best practices for the assessment of bikeability within and pedestrian access to urban areas. What gets

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measured gets managed. Currently, it is impossible to assess the impact of capital facilities projects on the cyclists, walkers, rollers using micromobility devices, or other pedestrians. The metrics of complete networks and connected streets only encourage the city to build what it has proposed to build. Complete networks and connected streets are of value, but following this course without additional metrics assumes that “if we build it, they will come”.

That position begs the response, trust but verify. Independent advocacy groups rate the city’s bikeability as low [2]. In addition to the collection of basic bicyclist and pedestrian usage metrics, which WSDOT provides an excellent guide for [4], the Federal Highway Administration has a metrics guide that might be employed [3].

Recommendations: That as part of the Capital Facilities Plan the city begin collecting permanent, periodic, and project specific data that includes Annual Average Daily Pedestrian Traffic (AADPT) and Annual Average Daily Bicycle Traffic (AADBT) at a minimum, so that well informed decision making is facilitated by data collected over time in a manner consistent with standard, best practices. Also that it seriously consider other metrics as mentioned in the FHWA handbook. The BPAC recommends a few metrics that may address the root causes of low adoption of bike and pedestrian networks:

- Network Connectivity. For example, between downtown and Capital Mall Triangle. Is there an easy way for bikes and pedestrians to travel between those areas?
- Pedestrian- or cyclist-involved collisions. This data is only collected for the Safety Plan, and should be more consistently monitored.
- Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) per Capita, which is already in the Thurston Regional Planning Council metrics and the TMP, tied to the goal of decreasing VMT.
- Average Travel Time
- Connectivity Index
- Network Completeness
- Route Directness
- Transportation Disadvantaged Population Served
- User Perceptions

URGENCY

To create safe, welcoming, and accessible transportation network, the city must dramatically reduce reliance on personal automobiles. All the incremental progress outlined in the CFP and TMP will not add up to the shift from moving cars to moving human beings on a human-scale timeline. The current transportation system and its planned upgrades in the TMP are too focused on increasing or maintaining convenience for cars.

Recommendation: Design transportation systems that are less convenient for cars and more convenient for pedestrians and bicycles.

CONCLUSION

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In the opinion of this committee, the CFP and TMP fail to meet the goals of the Comprehensive Plan and are not aggressive enough to address the root causes of pedestrian- and cyclist-involved collisions with cars, as studied in the city's Safety Plan. Projects to improve bikeability, walkability, and pedestrian safety should have higher prioritization per the city's goals, as outlined in the CFP.

We think it's controversial to only have one way of getting around. We have choices in all other parts of our lives, but when it comes to transportation, we often only have one option, and we want the increased availability of non-car options that are safe, comfortable, interesting, and convenient paths. The individual approaches of the CFP projects do not form a cohesive whole that will encourage multi-modal transportation.

Along with other cities nationwide, we face a historic opportunity to diversify our transportation network, and in turn reduce air pollution and planet-warming emissions. Billions of dollars of federal grants are available for cities to invest in transit, bicycle lanes and pedestrian safety projects, largely through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 and the Inflation Reduction Act, President Joe Biden's signature climate law.

We appreciate the hard work that goes into creating and maintaining the CFP, and recognize that Olympia is making real progress toward making a more inclusive and accessible transportation system. We are making some large change recommendations, and we sincerely appreciate the invitation to do so.

REFERENCES

[1] <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2024-07-17/biking-walking-to-work-a-game-changer-for-health>

[2] <https://cityratings.peopleforbikes.org/cities/olympia-wa>

[3] https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/environment/bicycle_pedestrian/publications/performance_measures_guidebook/

[4] <https://wsdot.wa.gov/about/transportation-data/travel-data/bicyclist-and-pedestrian-count-programs>.

GLOSSARY

Induced demand is the phenomenon where increasing road capacity (like adding more lanes) leads to more traffic. When roads are expanded, driving becomes more convenient, which increases usage. Over time, this additional usage offsets the initial benefits of reduced congestion, often resulting in traffic levels returning to or exceeding previous levels.

Road Diet reduces the number of lanes on a road, i.e. converting four lanes into three: two lanes for traffic and a center turn lane. The freed-up space is used for bike lanes, or wider sidewalks. The extra space is used for pedestrian or bicycle accessible lanes.

END DRAFT

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