

The Road to Hell is Paved with People Who Don't Believe in Road Paving

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In this week's issue of THE WEEKLY STANDARD I have [a long feature](#) on how America's hipster theme park Portland, Oregon destroyed its infrastructure and jobs base in order to indulge a bizarre obsession with public transportation and other cultural fetishes. Among other things, I noted that the city isn't budgeting for "major road paving" for the next five years.

The article was published Saturday and then, almost as if on cue, the Sunday *Oregonian* had [a big reported feature complete with graphs and interactive maps on how the city's roads are just falling apart](#):

A nearly complete assessment has found that 46 percent of neighborhood streets and 28 percent of major roads are in "poor" or "very poor" shape. And the last time the city estimated streets needing repair, in 2008, it came up with a staggering 1,250 miles. That doesn't count the city's 60 or so miles of gravel roads, most inherited through annexations of county property.

So if Portland isn't paving roads—generally considered one of the most essential functions of government—what are they spending money on? Here's reporter Beth Slovic observing that the city has some odd fiscal priorities:

The bureau has other priorities, such as \$900,000 to build 13.5 miles of bike routes, \$665,000 to add eight permanent employees to oversee streetcars, \$200,000 for Rose Festival prep work and \$15,000 to help sponsor a "Rail-Volution" conference in Los Angeles. Just last week, the City Council redirected \$250,000 from the current transportation budget to buy fancy planters and streetlights for the downtown retail core.

How did the bureau end up scrapping a core function such as major paving, unlike other area cities such as Tigard, Hillsboro and Oregon City? The answer holds as many twists and turns as the West Hills' Germantown Road. Reasons include a failure to heed years of auditors' warnings, an intentional shift away from a "roads first" focus, faulty revenue

forecasts, and obligations on big projects such as the new Sellwood Bridge and the [light rail] MAX line to [Portland suburb] Milwaukie.

Notably, the reasons do not include a lack of money. On Nov. 1, bureau director Tom Miller cited "an ever-shrinking number of dollars" in announcing that he would strip \$16 million in services from the 2012-13 budget. But the bureau's own documents show it expects to have more "discretionary" money than ever -- \$100 million out of a total budget of \$222 million.

Randal O'Toole, the CATO Institute fellow whose work on Portland I cited in my piece for the magazine, has a [good discussion of this on his blog](#), which you should read. One of his commenters makes the following observation:

Rhetorical questions follow:

- (1) What percentage of food consumed by Portland residents (at home, in restaurants and from food trucks) is delivered by light rail or streetcar?
- (2) What percentage of the fuel that warms Portland in the winter is delivered by light rail or streetcar?
- (3) What percentage of the building materials that make up the apartments (that Portland Metro wants to force people to live in) is delivered by light rail or streetcar?
- (4) What percentage of the goods delivered by the U.S. Postal Service and its private competitors, UPS and FedEx (and others) is delivered by light rail or streetcar?
- (5) What percentage of the patrons at the Cascade Station IKEA store take their (frequently large and heavy) flat-packed purchases home via light rail?
- (6) What percentage of municipal refuse (trash) and recycling that Portland residents generate is hauled-away by light rail or streetcar?
- (7) Even in Portland, people need to use the restroom sometimes, and what percentage of biosolids (the "solid" part of what gets processed by Portland's wastewater treatment system) is hauled-away by light rail or streetcar?

Question number six is particularly apropos, because many Portland residents are still grumbling that the city has reduced trash collection to twice a month.

And for what it's worth, Jack Bogdanski, a Lewis & Clark University law professor who runs a terrific blog on Portland and its discontents, has another [great take of the Oregonian's article on roads](#). He was also kind enough to [direct his readers to my own article on Portland](#), and the discussion in the comments, criticism and all, is generally insightful.