

# Metro Regional Rail Futures Study

December 2025

## Background

The Metro Regional Transportation Plan (RTP) establishes a strong vision for transit to help the Portland metropolitan region meet its transportation goals and provide communities with equitable, economic, safety and climate benefits. However, gaps remain in the transit system.

In 2024, Senate Bill 5701(Section 503) directed Metro to study the use of the region's freight rail network for passenger rail service. The over 200 miles of freight rail corridors traversing the Portland region and beyond represent a potentially underutilized passenger mobility resource.

This one-year study is an early step to assess rail assets and their suitability for future passenger rail service by researching best practices and peer lessons, inventorying corridors and travel demand, reviewing local and regional plans and priorities, engaging interested parties, the team identified barriers and opportunities, potential corridors for future study, and high-level recommendations.

## What is Regional Rail?

Regional rail is a transit mode providing passenger service on heavy rail corridors with service throughout the day. It is part of a transit continuum with stations farther apart than light rail, but closer than Amtrak. It can support economic growth, compact development, expanded mobility options, while reducing congestion and emissions.

## Key Study findings

- **Regional rail is well-suited to longer trips** that are hard for a single transit district to serve.
- **Travel demand is highest within the Metro region** itself, but **demand beyond the region** (such as to Clark, Marion, Yamhill Counties) is an important consideration
- **Significant improvements would be required** to many track segments and structures and crossings throughout the region to make passenger service viable. In addition, investments in stations would require careful siting and investments
- **Higher relative operating cost** of regional rail service means it should be **reserved for corridors with the most demand providing critical connections**
- **Some corridors may not be “ripe”** for passenger service on the heavy freight rail network yet, but starting with **bus service can help to build demand** and ridership readiness

# Opportunities and Recommended Next Steps

Developing passenger rail service can take many decades. Despite the challenges, there are opportunities to make progress now toward future regional rail service.

- **Build ridership with land use decisions and lower cost transit investments to prepare for passenger rail.**
- **Improve cross-regional travel with investments in MAX infrastructure.** The central city has limited heavy rail corridor capacity and major bottlenecks. MAX already serves the central corridor but is slowed and often delayed. A major investment in travel times such as **a MAX tunnel or replacement of the Steel Bridge should be studied.**
- **Consider connections to areas outside of the Portland region,** especially Marion County or to new Cascadia HSR investment
- **Enhance intermodal connections between heavy rail and other modes** improving access to likely station locations with pedestrian, bike, and transit connections
- **Build a Long-Term Vision for passenger rail with local, regional, and super-regional partners and community engagement**
  - *Building demand for regional passenger service requires a strategic long-term vision that is backed by funding, super-regional land use planning, and development of a comprehensive multimodal network.*
  - *The Vision must be integrated with local and regional plans and be created with public engagement and support.*
  - *Transformative investments like Cascadia High Speed Rail present an opportunity for our region to think ahead 50-100 years*
  - *Passenger rail best fits in an expanded regional context, serving longer trips and expanding access to opportunity for more Oregonians.*

## ***How does this project relate to Cascadia High Speed Rail (HSR) and the Cascadia Innovation Corridor (CIC)?***

Separate efforts are underway to enhance economies and connections between Portland, Seattle, and Vancouver, BC. The Cascadia HSR program envisions a new high speed rail line linking the Cascadia Megaregion with a 2-hour trip between Portland and Vancouver, BC. The CIC is an economic strategy to realize a thriving economy in the same Megaregion- connecting workers, employers, and innovators with climate-friendly transportation and affordable housing.

To maximize benefits in greater Portland, HSR needs to be integrated with the regional transportation networks to boost travel on the region's existing transit system and unlock passenger rail service opportunities in the future.