

Keynote Speech

Speaker: Paul Pearce, Skamania County Commissioner

Good Morning. I first want to thank all of you for taking a day to be here and discuss these extremely important issues. We at MCEDD have talked about transportation and ... transit specifically ... for as long as I have served on the board. I also want to thank Amanda Remington MCEDD and her staff. Finally I want to personally thank Alina who has worked this tirelessly, and who every time I'm at a transportation meeting of any kind is the first person I recognize, no matter where the meeting is held.

So my talk is entitled What does transportation mean ... It's a great question especially in the rural areas such as ours? If I asked 100 people on the street I'd probably get 100 answers. It all revolves around the way you live – work – and play.

For instance in my county 60% of those with jobs leave the county for work. We continue to have 13+ % unemployment ... which hasn't changed at all ... from many years prior to this economic downturn through today. Over 50 % of the school children receive reduced or free lunch in school. Transportation has a significantly different meaning to these folks than to many of us. Are we meeting their needs ... hopefully we'll have an opportunity to discuss that today.

I believe that transportation means Education ... and Health Care ... and Jobs ... and Tourism ... and Recreation ... or if you pull it all together ... Livability

When I talk about Education ... my son's story always comes to mind ... it so perfectly describes the difference between Urban and Rural transportation.

In 2000 my son graduated from Washougal High School ... He enrolled at the University of Washington in Seattle. His enrollment included a U pass ... That's a U pass - not a you pass ... which allowed him to use all public transit in the Seattle Area. He rode Amtrak to and from Seattle. He had a bicycle in Seattle but had no need of a car.

He went to work at the non woven mill in Washougal. ... After a few years the mill closed his line and relocated it to Mexico ... He was given a stipend for retraining ... And He finally decided on the Renewable Energy Degree program at Columbia Gorge Community College in The Dalles.

It's a fair drive from the west end of our county to the Dalles so he moved into a house we own in Goldendale and drove to school ... during his first summer break

he received an internship in Hood River ... Gas prices were rising ... with school in The Dalles ... work in Hood River he simply was unable to cover expenses... So for his second year we moved our 5th wheel to The Dalles and he spent the next year living in that.

I can't imagine what he would have done without our ability to cover his living arraignments ... and it really underscores why so many of our kids leave the area to go to school ... And Sadly many of them don't return.

What about Health Care... Especially when talking about our Seniors and young people ... As you know these are the people who have the least disposable income... In Skamania County we do have a small clinic but otherwise people have to go west to the metro area or east to Hood River for their health care. Many of them use the most expensive forms of public transportation involving some type of single rider transport.

My own mom lives in Goldendale ... her doctor is in Hood River ... She drives to each of her appointments. I find myself thinking that if and when she can no longer drive she will have to leave her home and friends to live with us simply

because there is no basic transit in the gorge. This happens to seniors in all of our communities and it is a shame.

In Skamania County we operate a three time per day deviated route bus from mid county to the Transit Center in East Vancouver ... I have been continually impressed as the ridership is exceptional and when gas approached four dollar a gallon the busses were full to capacity.

We Commissioners have been so impressed with the westbound service that we considered funding an eastbound bus as well. We spent a great deal of time discussing this option and decided it just couldn't be done without connections for riders to get into Hood River or the White Salmon area. You can't even bicycle or walk across the Hood River bridge. We even discussed making some stops in the Hood river/White Salmon area. We simply couldn't figure out how to manage it and the end result is still no eastbound transit.

Many of the companies that settle here end up with facilities throughout the region. Insitu is a perfect example. Public transit would enhance our desirability many times over ... As to economic growth we need to realize that without many

transportation alternatives and facilities we will miss out. It is critical infrastructure ... not unlike roads, water and schools to name a few

As we have done on so many other issues in our two state - five county region we need to tackle this issue before it really begins to impact our ability to move forward with so many of our economic initiatives’.

Tourism to our region has been such a surprise to me. We were at a meeting in Olympia with the Jay Manning who was then the head of the Dept of Ecology ... he mentioned how much he really enjoys coming down to ride his bike in the Columbia Gorge. As I talked to other bicyclists I found that the Gorge and surrounding areas are prime for their brand of tourism ... But try riding a bicycle on SR 14 ... They are certainly a lot braver than I am ...

And as we worked on the Mt St Helens Committee taking public testimony on the future of the monument we found that there are so many differing types of recreation today that many of us had never heard of.... I mean Who ever heard of Boulder Hopping? Well ... well there’s a location where they do that in my county.

In fact our bus has been used at least once in a Transit to Trails promotion where folks rode the bus to the Cape Horn Trail from the Portland metro area. We here in the mid Columbia and the gorge have it all ... but if we don't get ahead of the transportation part of tourism ... from safe bike paths on both sides of the river ... to convenient and affordable transit for people who work in the tourism industry people are going to go elsewhere.

I am extremely hopeful that with the combined talent in the room we will develop direction to start to tackle this problem on many levels. We live in a place that is second to none A part of that livability must be answers to the questions we're delving into today ... Followed by a path forward to achieve solutions ... One thing I have found as an elected official in this region is that when we grab onto a problem we usually solve it.

Thank you for your time, your energy and your talent.