

when you come to a fork in the road, take it?



I like amusing metaphors, and this one is attributed to Yogi Berra, the well-known baseball player and coach from the United States of America (USA). When faced with a decision or choice between pathways in sport, or perhaps life, he suggests it doesn't really matter which direction you choose. The important thing is to make an authoritative decision and confidently move forward – most pathways are fine, and all is likely to end well. Unfortunately, transport planning is not always so simple: it is usually very important to take a particular trajectory in planning new transport systems, including the investment given to some modes relative to others.

Portland, Oregon, USA is an interesting case study for us to consider, with important lessons for elsewhere. The city has grown in population over decades, to an urban population of 650,000 and wider metropolitan area of 2.5 million in 2020.¹

Sometimes described as the 'poster child' of urban planning in the USA; urban growth has been managed, with a dense, compact urban centre and application of a growth boundary to restrict urban sprawl. There is a light rail system and relatively good cycle network; traffic is managed and does not overwhelm the city centre, and it is easy and comfortable to walk and cycle around. There are many pleasant neighbourhoods to live in, with easy commutes into the city centre. There is even a tradition of traffic management through freeway removal projects, with the first significant freeway removal project in the USA at Harbor Drive, where the freeway was removed in 1974 and replaced with a riverfront park in 1978, which was extended south towards South Bond Avenue in the early 2000s.

So far, so good – this looks like an example of sustainable city development. Yet, alongside this, there is a fascinating backstory of institutionally racist urban planning and highway development

practices, of the type perhaps most acutely found in the USA. In the 1950s and 1960s, Albina – a neighbourhood to the north of the central railway station – emerged as a low-income housing area, with a predominantly black population. The planning and development practices of the time were to disinvest in the housing stock, refuse access to mortgage lending (through 'redlining' of parts of the neighbourhood), and to underprovide schools and community facilities. Low property values followed, alongside continued disinvestment in the housing stock, and, subsequently, neighbourhood decline and social problems.² Further, the Interstate-5 highway (I-5) was routed through Albina in 1962, leading to the demolition of nearly 300 homes along the highway corridor. This was accentuated by later 'urban renewal' projects, such as the Legacy Emanuel Hospital and Moda Center sports arena, which also involved housing demolition and population displacement. The southern neighbourhoods in Albina lost almost two thirds of their population by 1970, with about 8,000 residents being displaced, mostly to East Portland.^{3, 4}



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The 'Portland model' of urban development has produced a compact urban centre and attractive city on the banks of the Willamette River – with a light rapid transport system and cycle network

The I-5 was justified, by the state and city authorities, as facilitating the redevelopment of the so-called 'blighted' low-income neighbourhood. The highway also provided a connection into the city centre for the higher-income outer suburbanites, usually of white ethnic origin, who had moved away from the inner urban areas as part of the 'white flight' of earlier decades. This was a story replicated in many cities across the USA, with interstate highways and urban renewal justified as important to maintaining the failing tax bases and economies of cities, whilst the social problems of demolition, highway severance and displacement were overlooked.

The current proposals for Albina seem to be taking a further problematic turn. There are plans from the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) for increased highway capacity on the I-5, including through Albina.⁵ The proposals are for at least one extra highway lane in each direction – and there is space for much more. The project is justified in terms of reducing congestion and removing a traffic 'bottleneck' yet overlooks the increased traffic volumes that will use the highway, with all the associated adverse environmental and social impacts. Certainly, the project is inconsistent with climate change goals and requirements to reduce transport CO₂ emissions – and it is being

challenged on these grounds by local community groups, such as No More Freeways. There is a short section of highway decking proposed through Albina, which offers some development potential over the highway, but appears to be offered only to placate local residents.

ODOT, it seems, is still unduly influenced by an obsolete highway planning agenda, and, presumably, the motor manufacturers and road-building lobby. It is aware that there are climate change goals and social equity goals, yet still puts forward increased highway capacity as being important to Portland and more widely across Oregon. The promise of electric vehicles (EVs) is unlikely to resolve these problems – as the source power will only be partially renewable – and, of course, EVs lead to congestion and social inequity in similar ways to conventionally-fuelled vehicles.

Again, we have an example of a fuzzy definition of sustainability and transport, with much postulation about sustainability, yet further highway building is still proposed. Yogi Berra, of course, was not so concerned about the powerful actors influencing one governmental choice over another. But this seems to be happening in many contexts, where the road-building lobby coalesces behind the highway agencies and pushes highway investments forward. The governmental bodies are too weak to



Phillip Barton

Tom McCall Waterfront Park, Portland, spanned by the I-5



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The regime of motorisation is still pervasive, with a very wide corridor of land adversely impacted by the I-5. Yet, current proposals increase highway capacity, only leading to increased traffic volumes and CO₂ emissions.

resist and become captured – defending the highway building plans as part of a self-described ‘sustainable transport’ strategy. Transport planners often fail to adequately problematise the context with which they are faced: in this case, the problematic history of severance and displacement in Albina, and a contemporary requirement to reduce traffic volumes in the Portland Metropolitan Area on environmental and social grounds. Building any large transport project is not sufficient – project prioritisation needs to fund only the projects that address environmental and social goals.

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Notes

- 1 United States Census Bureau. Webpage. <https://data.census.gov/table/DECENNIALDHC2020.P1?q=portland%20oregon>
- 2 KJ Gibson: ‘Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000’. *Transforming Anthropology*, 2007, Vol. 15(1), 3-25. For full text, see here: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1289&context=usp_fac
- 3 J Cortright: ‘How ODOT destroyed Albina: The I-5 Meat Axe’. Webpage. City Commentary, City Observatory, 30 Mar. 2021. https://cityobservatory.org/how_odot_destroyed_albina_par2/
- 4 R Davis: ‘Whitewashing Albina’s destruction’. Webpage. *The Oregonian*, Publishing Prejudice, Oregonian Media Group, 30 May 2023. <https://projects.oregonlive.com/publishing-prejudice/whitewashing-destruction>
- 5 ‘I-5 Rose Quarter Improvement Project: Bringing Change to the Quarter’. Website. Oregon Department of Transportation, 2023. <https://www.i5rosequarter.org/>