

The Oregonian

Portland poised to extend transit pass inequity: Editorial Agenda 2016

By The Oregonian Editorial Board

March 31, 2016

So empty are the city of Portland's pockets that commissioners have placed a gas tax on the May ballot to maintain local roads. Nonetheless, Mayor Charlie Hales would like to spend another million dollars or so to buy TriMet transit passes for Portland Public Schools students. Such passes may or may not be a good use of public funds. But providing student transportation, like student instruction, is a responsibility of the district, not the city. Voters should take note.

An agreement between Superintendent Carole Smith and the mayor, first reported in Willamette Week, would allow the city to use a district building as a homeless shelter. In exchange, the city would continue to provide funding for school resource officers and for transit passes. The details have yet to be worked out, according to Josh Alpert, the mayor's chief of staff. But the agreement would not involve a long-term commitment to pay for transit passes, for which the city now contributes about one-third of the cost, or about \$960,000 per year. The school district and TriMet kick in the rest.

One good thing that can be said about the agreement is that this time, at least, the city would be getting something in return for its money: the use of a district building on the former Washington High School campus. This is certainly better than simply giving the district funds that could be used for something else, as the city does now.

Even so, it's misguided. The city's involvement in the Youth Pass program is a textbook example of good intentions and momentum pairing up to defeat good government and affront equity — about which city officials claim to care deeply.

Unlike most other districts, Portland Public Schools does not provide yellow bus service to high school students. The district relies, instead, on Portland's extensive public transit system. The district at one time bought transit passes for low-income students who lived beyond walking distance from their schools. Other students could buy passes with the benefit of deep discounts.

The program was expanded prior to Hales' tenure through the use of Business Energy Tax Credits, an arrangement that ultimately provided transit passes to all district high school students and handed the state much of the bill. When BETC dollars began to dry up, the city helped fill the funding gap. The practice was firmly established by the time Hales took office in 2013. Had it not been, said Hales' former spokesman, Dana Haynes, in 2014, the mayor would not have considered student transportation a city responsibility.

But it was established, and here we are: Another million bucks or so may soon be spent on transit passes.

City taxpayers have good reason to resent this use of their money, especially as they prepare to vote on a gas tax. Some people, meanwhile, have reason to be doubly resentful. They include Portlanders who have kids in private schools. They pay taxes, but they don't get free transit passes. Also rightfully aggrieved are Portland parents of kids who attend the Reynolds and Centennial school districts, both of which have higher percentages of low-income students than Portland Public Schools. Yet only Portland Public Schools benefits from the free-pass program. Portland leaders perpetuate such inequities every time they extend the city's commitment to the Youth Pass program.

Portland leaders could affirm their commitment to both equity and fiscal responsibility by saying "no" to Portland Public Schools. The district might not like that much, but school board members could always fill the funding gap with district money if they considered the Youth Pass program worthwhile. The city, in turn, could spend its savings on something more consistent with its mission, whether that's fixing streets or renting space to house the homeless.

The Portland Mercury

Portland Is The Latest City To Ban Employee Travel To North Carolina

*By Dirk VanderHart
March 31, 2016*

Good news for city employees: They're not in danger of being sent to North Carolina any time soon.

As expected, Portland City Council voted unanimously today to temporarily prohibit any city travel to the Tar Heel State until officials there repeal a law that prohibits transgender people from using restrooms that correspond with their gender, and stops local governments from enacting protections.

North Carolina's legislature passed the law by a wide margin last week, incensed that the City of Charlotte had attempted to pass an anti-discrimination ordinance.

"It's always surprising how out of touch, increasingly, state capitols are with the people they're elected to represent," Commissioner Dan Saltzman said before voting this morning.

"Shame on them," Commissioner Nick Fish said.

The vote comes a little more than three months after Portland enacted a policy requiring single-use, gender-neutral restrooms in many city facilities, and directing study for potentially creating multi-person gender-neutral restrooms.

Portland's move is neither surprising nor unique, of course. Cities like San Francisco, Seattle, and West Palm Beach, Fla., have taken similarly anti-Carolinian steps since the law passed. So have the governors of New York and Vermont.

And Portland's trodden this ground before. Exactly one year ago today, in fact, when Mayor Charlie Hales unilaterally announced he was banning publicly funded travel to Indiana, which had passed a discriminatory law.

Just as in the Indiana incident, there's not much chance any city employee's trip is going to be dashed. Jen Clodius, spokesperson for the city's Office of Management and Finance, says her office isn't technically certain no one's planning to go to North Carolina—it doesn't find out about those plans until after employees return.

"We did reach out to the city's travel agency," Clodius says. "They don't have a way to sort for city employees."

So it's technically a mystery, but not a stretch to think this is all symbolic. And just like Indiana, North Carolina's law may not be around for long. It's already being challenged by LGBT advocates, and the state's attorney general says he won't defend the law.

Here's the resolution council passed this morning [[pdf](#)].