

**Written statement of
Sam Desue, Jr.
General Manager of the
Tri-County Metropolitan Transportation District of Oregon**

**Before the
United States House of Representatives Committee on
Transportation and Infrastructure Hearing on**

**“Investing in the Nation’s Infrastructure and Workers: Why it Matters.”
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Chair DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves and Members of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, my name is Sam Desue Jr., and I am General Manager of TriMet, the regional transit agency serving the beautiful Portland Metropolitan area in Oregon – a metropolitan area of about 2.5 million people.

I appreciate the opportunity to be here today to discuss the critical importance of Federal investment in the mobility service provided by TriMet and our workforce, and to thank you for ensuring we had the resources to maintain those services and continue to plan for the future of mobility in our region.

TriMet’s service district includes Multnomah, Washington, and Clackamas counties, encompassing an area of about 533 square miles that includes nearly 40 cities. We operate 5 light rail lines, 82 bus lines, 1 commuter rail line and LIFT paratransit service. All our buses and railcars are American-made. TriMet employs over 3,000 people and over 2,400 members of our workforce are union jobs directly supporting operations, maintenance and safety of our transit system. Without our workforce we could not provide these vital services to the Portland region.

Our system provides essential transportation and mobility options that connect people with their community, while easing traffic congestion and reducing air pollution — facilitating economic growth, transit-oriented development and livability.

Prior to the pandemic, TriMet provided an average of over 1.9 million transit rides every week. Portland is the **25th largest** U.S. metro area, and TriMet's *service outpaces its population base by ranking 17th* in transit ridership and **11th** in ridership per capita.

TriMet has been a leader in innovation for American transit. From our open-sourced data that led to Google Transit to our light rail design and construction. Over 100 transit agencies in America and 35 cities from around the world have come to us to learn from our successes. Every major light rail line has been delivered on time and on budget – or earlier and under budget.

We have bold goals for growing transit ridership, transitioning to a zero emissions fleet and supporting transit investments to build more livable communities.

We are here today to primarily say thank you and to share some examples of the impact of recent federal investment for our transit agency. In particular, I want to thank you for COVID relief emergency funding and historic investment in public transportation contained in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA). These investments have been, and will be, critical to ensuring that we can meet the challenges we faced during the unprecedented COVID public health crisis. They allow

TriMet to position itself to meet future mobility and accessibility needs of the greater Portland region.

COVID-19

Like all transit agencies, the COVID-19 pandemic had a severe impact on TriMet's operations and revenue. When ridership, and our projected revenues, fell dramatically in the spring of 2020, TriMet acted quickly to reallocate service and save resources until demand returned. We focused on minimizing cuts to service for our equity communities, transit-dependent riders and essential workers. We redirected resources in a variety of ways that I'd like to share with you today. None of this would have been possible without the ongoing support from the federal government.

We are so appreciative for Congress providing this critical emergency relief funding to allow us to maintain operations and continue to provide vital and lifeline transportation services to our region. Emergency funding provided through CARES, CRRSA Act, ARP allowed us to avoid furloughs and layoffs so that we could keep our cities and counties moving and functioning. All CARES and CRRSA Act funds allocated to TriMet have been spent and all ARP funds have been spent or obligated.

We are proud to say that not one TriMet employee was furloughed during the pandemic, and these funds allowed us to keep our highly-skilled, trained workforce. As you are all aware, hiring, and re-hiring, has been quite a challenge for many industries since early 2021. The ability to retain our workforce was critical to our being

able to provide transportation services to essential workers and access to vital services to transit dependent riders. Federal COVID emergency funding made this possible.

These funds also ensured that riders and TriMet operators remained safe while using our system, by putting additional public health measures into place to prevent the spread of COVID. We were able to adjust our service to meet demand, ensuring essential workers could get to work and people who are transit-dependent continued to have access to jobs and services. We learned immediately that essential workers were critical to addressing the pandemic and recovering from it. We prioritized service to hospitals and other medical facilities. With physical distancing limiting capacity on transit, we added extra buses so we wouldn't have to leave anyone behind on lines that served our essential workers like nurses, technicians and doctors.

We made sure that people who often rely exclusively on transit always had service. These are the people essential to keeping society working. People who stock our grocery stores supply us with essential products that communities need to function, and they need transit. While essential workers and those making lower wages may not always get recognition, the pandemic proved how vital they are in a time of crisis. We were here for them—and are here for them. Had transit not been there, the shortages and supply chain nightmares we have experienced would have been significantly worse. Transit kept people and commerce moving!

Our team truly went above and beyond to ensure that TriMet service could support those who needed it most during the pandemic. Initially, we had to innovate to ensure we had the equipment and tools we needed to keep people safe on our system. We called it MacGyvering. We reached out to businesses, asked them to innovate. First, we needed masks. We searched the internet for mask designs. Marketplace innovation sprang into action, as fabric stores opened to get us materials. Small, women-owned businesses started churning out masks in our district with scores of people producing masks at home with sewing machines. TriMet didn't have hand sanitizer. No one did early in the pandemic. We figured out how to produce it ourselves. We worked with breweries, which we have a lot of in Portland, as Chair DeFazio is familiar with, to generate alcohol for our own sanitizer. Pretty quickly, we were supplying others with sanitizer, when the supply wasn't meeting the demand.

TriMet continued to innovate with our resources. We supported overloaded hospitals and developed a partnership between our LIFT paratransit team and Oregon Health & Science University when hospitals were approaching capacity. TriMet came in to help to transport patients who no longer needed hospital care to their home or to a care facility. We brought people to vaccine appointments. We delivered groceries to LIFT customers who were at high risk of contracting COVID and unable to leave their homes. TriMet redeployed our on-street customer service team to partner with Meals on Wheels. As volunteers stayed home, our staff helped meet the increased demand

for food for children, families and seniors who would have otherwise gone hungry. We were truly providing a lifeline to so many of our region's residents.

Pandemic relief allowed us to proceed with planned critical safety and maintenance projects that would have had to be cancelled or postponed when faced such a severe and unexpected funding shortfall. Like all transit agencies, TriMet has a significant deferred maintenance backlog. We have been and remain committed to addressing this backlog. The significant decline in revenues threatened these ongoing efforts to maintain and upgrade our existing assets to ensure and improve the safety and reliability our system.

The projects included replacing rail switches that were over 35 years old and worn out. Signalization of the same era was replaced with new technologies and computerization that we didn't have when TriMet's first light rail line—the third in the nation—was built.

TriMet was able to implement a critical rail safety project on the oldest section of our light rail system, in a high-speed curved area, replacing old wooden rail ties, doubling the useful life of the system. What otherwise would have been an incredibly disruptive project was able to be carried out efficiently to reduce project costs and long-term maintenance costs.

We advanced a project to make critical improvements on the Steel Bridge - every one of our light rail trains goes across this lift bridge (along with freight rail, passenger vehicles, buses, bikes and pedestrians). We were able to essentially replace

and rebuild the light rail system across the bridge at a time of reduced ridership. The funding provided through COVID relief meant the project could be done more efficiently, and we were able to accomplish all the safety, reliability and system resiliency elements necessary, rather than scaling them back and stretching them out over time.

The infusion of federal funds also put TriMet in a better position to meet our climate goals and implement a change in fuel sources. We had done a renewable/sustainability study but had to delay it due to the costs. But because we had those dollars available, we were able to implement our goals and transition our entire fleet to renewable diesel. By switching to renewable diesel, and to renewable electricity for our light rail system and all TriMet-owned facilities, we reduced our greenhouse gas emissions by about 70% in a year's time.

These are just a few examples of just how critical the Emergency COVID relief funds provided by Congress were in allowing TriMet to retain its workforce, provide mobility to essential workers, accessibility to vital services for vulnerable communities and riders, and continue to invest in making our system safer and more prepared to provide reliable transit as ridership returns.

Plans for the future – Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act

While the COVID relief funding was critical to allowing TriMet to continue to be a lifeline to many in our region throughout the public health emergency, the historic

investments in public transportation infrastructure contained in the IIJA will be a game-changer that will help transform the Portland/Vancouver region's transportation network. The significant increase in investment levels contained in IIJA filled the gap in funding ongoing maintenance needs, as well as allowing us to continue to advance capital projects to upgrade our system to expand service and address our region's mobility, quality of life, and environmental challenges.

IIJA will provide a total of \$503.6 million for the Portland/Vancouver region in FTA formula funding over the 5-years of the bill. This increased FTA formula funding is critical to allowing us to begin addressing our deferred and preventive maintenance needs, as well as to begin making investments for future growth. This unprecedented funding and the increases in federal discretionary grant opportunities under the IIJA give us a lot to look forward to. The opportunities provided by the IIJA are critical to our agency's goals to rebuild transit ridership and address the climate crisis. Investing in efforts to support ridership recovery is one of the agency's biggest priorities. We have some success stories to share on our progress.

Like many agencies, TriMet's ridership has been steadily returning throughout 2022. We're seeing an average growth of nearly 6,000 riders per week. This is especially encouraging because, like many industries, we've been facing an operator shortage and have not been able to restore service to pre-pandemic levels because of that shortage. More people are riding again, and we're growing our workforce and planning for service and ridership growth in the future.

As ridership returns, we are planning for how TriMet can best address the region's future mobility needs. Just yesterday, we released a new transit network concept to plan for service growth and address the changing travel patterns we've analyzed during the pandemic. Working with the community, we will further define this concept for how best to restore and grow transit while emphasizing building ridership and expanding transit options across our region. This effort is supported by an FTA Route Planning Restoration grant.

A key step in our path towards ridership recovery was the September 18th launch of the Division Transit Project, TriMet's new FX™ high-capacity bus service. Funded by an FTA Small Starts grant and local partners, this project improves travel along a 13-mile corridor that is one of TriMet's most popular bus lines, with more than 10,000 daily rides between Downtown Portland and Gresham. Prior to the opening of this FX service, riders on this bus line crowded buses, full buses passing riders waiting at stops, and traffic congestion behind buses making frequent stops to pick up riders.

The Division Transit Project will provide riders with easier, faster, and more reliable service. This project features all-door boarding, improved stations, and transit priority improvements to speed up transit trips, while addressing congestion along the Division Street Corridor.

Our ridership recovery initiatives are also about more than service improvements and capital projects.

TriMet would like to highlight the work we have done to reimagine safety and security on our transit system. TriMet began this process in June of 2020 after hearing calls for racial equity and social justice following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and many others. TriMet responded by exploring community-based approaches to public safety. We engaged in comprehensive outreach with riders, community groups, local leaders, the public, and our frontline workers and security staff and have begun agency-wide implementation of those recommendations. We've launched safety response teams to provide information, first aid, mental health support and conflict resolution across our transit system.

TriMet has expanded our fare discount programs to support more people who are struggling financially, seniors, veterans, youth, people with disabilities – the communities who need transit most, and who we've provided a lifeline to throughout the pandemic.

We've also launched a program to rehabilitate, expand and improve operator and customer amenities at our busiest transit centers. These investments make a difference for everyday riders, who just need a safe and comfortable place to wait or transfer to help them get to where they are going reliably.

We are also primed to take advantage of the growth in federal discretionary grant programs to support the expansion of our MAX network and to grow our bus rapid transit network with more (FX) Frequent Express service on our highest ridership bus lines.

We are working towards pursuing federal funding for the 82nd Avenue Bus Rapid Transit project. The bus line serving 82nd Avenue has the highest ridership of any bus line in greater Portland. Though it carries more people than some of the region's light rail lines, it shares the road with commuters, freight, and local deliveries – and is often stuck in traffic significant increasing travel time and degrading reliability.

We are currently partnering with Metro, the City of Portland and Clackamas County to undertake a transit alternatives analysis for potential bus rapid transit service along 82nd Avenue from Clackamas Town Center to Portland's Roseway and Sumner neighborhoods. BRT on this route would significantly improve travel time, reliability, and comfort by allowing the bus to separate from or bypass other vehicle traffic in key areas along the route and improving stations. This transit project will also be highly coordinated with a community-led Equitable Development Strategy to support business and community stabilization and enhancement. The transit analysis is being developed in coordination with the City of Portland's "Building a Better 82nd" program, which is investing \$80 million in near-term safety improvements and another \$105 million to enact a vision to improve the corridor.

We are also excited about the many opportunities in the IIJA to support and advance TriMet's Zero Emission Bus transition plan to make the investments we need to meet the goals of our own Climate Action Plan and our state and region's goals to increase transit usage and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Earlier this year, TriMet

made our first bulk purchase of 24 American-made, battery electric buses. TriMet is committed to being part of the solution to climate change, and the funds now available through the IIJA are a game changer to make an immediate impact in reducing TriMet's emissions and working with our state and local partners to address climate change.

TriMet had 700 diesel buses in our fleet as of June 2021, and we were the largest purchaser of diesel fuel in Oregon. Working in partnership with the two electric providers in our region - Portland General Electric and Pacific Power – we are well on the way to changing that. We are committed to having a 100 percent zero-emission fleet by 2040, and the funding provided through the IIJA will help us achieve this goal.

The conversion to zero emission buses is the most significant technological change TriMet has ever faced. TriMet is prepared to make significant investments in transitioning our fleet and facilities, but a strong federal funding partnership is critical to the success of this program. TriMet has identified local and state funds to help cover the costs of transitioning to zero emission buses. We estimate a significant funding gap to upgrade the entire fleet and facilities to charge and maintain the zero emissions fleet by 2040. TriMet is working to concurrently invest in charging infrastructure and facilities improvements across our service area to prepare for this transition.

We are working to develop a zero-emissions maintenance facility and charging infrastructure at Beaverton's Merlo Garage in order to expand TriMet's zero emissions

fleet on Portland's westside. TriMet's new Columbia Bus Base will help as the lynchpin to accelerate the TriMet's transition to a fully zero emission bus fleet by 2040, and to meet state and regional climate goals. This site is well-situated in an industrial area within TriMet's service district, allowing buses to begin and end their routes close to their home base and minimize their time in traffic. Master planning and design efforts are in progress, focused on the Columbia site's pivotal role in TriMet's transition to zero-emission buses and planned service growth. Advancing TriMet's Columbia Bus Base project is the key to not only advance our Zero Emissions Fleet Transition but also to increase transit service to meet demand across the growing region.

As you can see, we have big plans to help address the Portland region's mobility needs. This would not be possible without the actions this committee took to lead the effort to ensure public transit agencies had the resources to retain their workforce and continue to provide the vital services throughout the COVID-19 public health emergency. The transit services supported by federal investment are transformative to support mobility, reduce congestion, spur economic development and make an immediate impact in fighting the climate crisis.

In closing, I want to say thank you to this Committee, to Congress, and to Federal agencies for stepping in quickly to keep services like transit afloat, both through Covid relief funds and through the IIJA. Had Congress not acted decisively we would be in a much different place. But you acted and averted a potential great depression.