

The Monday Profile Jim Howell **Transit activist** is still on the road **not taken**

Oregon's two senators led dignitaries upstairs from the train to the Tigard transit center to break ground for Washington County's commuter rail project. About a dozen politicians took turns profusely thanking one another for a decade of hard work.

Nobody mentioned Jim Howell, though he stood at the edge of the crowd.

Howell came to witness one of his success stories. As a TriMet planner years before, it was his idea to put the **transit** center next to the train tracks.

"They all think it's a coincidence, now," Howell said, breaking into a wide grin.

But like so much that Portlanders take for granted --Tom McCall Waterfront Park, light rail, eastside neighborhoods undamaged by the maze of freeways --the connection between the existing bus system and commuter rail in Tigard wouldn't have happened without Howell.

The 72-year-old Beaumont resident's fingerprints can be found on virtually every big, public transportation decision of the past 40 years.

And he's still in there pitching, currently playing David vs. Goliath in the coming decade's most expensive transportation project, a new Interstate 5 bridge over the Columbia River. Howell envisions a cheaper alternative to the \$2 billion project that appears to be careening toward approval.

"I don't think you can name more than half a dozen people who have had more impact on the face of the **Portland** metro area," said Ron Buel, founder of Willamette Week, a key aide to then-**Portland** Mayor Neil Goldschmidt and a fellow **activist**.

"He doesn't get credit for that because he is such a gadfly."

Opponents and allies describe Howell as gracious in victory and defeat, passionate, credible on the facts, dogged and frustratingly uncompromising.

"Jim is incredibly passionate, but he doesn't leave much room between what he thinks is right and any other idea," said Fred Hansen, TriMet's general manager, who meets periodically with Howell.

Buel, who has worked with Howell on multiple issues over the years, including the current effort to bury Interstate 5 on the Eastbank, said Howell can be frustrating because "he's always right."

Born in Bethlehem, Pa., Howell moved to Oregon after high school in 1952. Jobs were scarce because of a steel strike, and mills in North Bend circulated fliers offering good wages. Howell and a buddy answered the call. He began attending Oregon State University, but he was drafted in 1955.

While serving in the U.S. Army in Germany, he became fascinated by efficient public transportation. After marrying in Germany, he studied architecture and planning at the University of Oregon. He left school in his fifth year without graduating, but he got his architect's license and moved to **Portland**.

For 45 years, he and his wife, Dorette, have lived in the same house and raised three, now adult, children; a son and daughter who are twins, and a second daughter.

Sinking Harbor Drive

Howell's first plunge into citizen activism came in the summer of 1969.

He and fellow architect Bob Belcher, and Belcher's wife, Allison, formed Riverfront for People to oppose a plan to expand Harbor Drive on the downtown waterfront.

The group wanted to remove the highway and build a park.

Allison Belcher was the "live wire" in the group, Howell said. She organized a picnic on a strip of green next to the highway that attracted 250 people and a lot of media. After an all-day hearing, Glenn Jackson, the powerful chairman of the Oregon Highway Commission, concluded that once the Fremont Bridge opened and the Interstate 405 loop was finished, the state wouldn't need Harbor Drive after all.

Howell's next target was the **Portland** Vancouver Metropolitan Transportation Study, a network of more than 50 new freeways and expressways envisioned by New York's Robert Moses for the metro area. The lines on the map included the Mount Hood Freeway, the Westside Bypass, the 20th Avenue Expressway, the Prescott Freeway and dozens more.

In the mid-1970s, Howell was a "planner advocate" for the Woodlawn neighborhood in Northeast **Portland** as part of the Model Cities program. The program offered housing rehabilitation loans, but not for houses in the path of a future federal highway. The proposed Prescott Freeway ran through the Northeast. The Kirby Street ramps off the Fremont Bridge are remnants of this plan.

With Buel, he formed Sensible Transportation Options for People --or STOP --with the goal of getting those lines off the map.

A group of citizens fighting the Mount Hood Freeway, an eight-lane, six-mile project that would connect Johns Landing with Interstate 205 and wipe out more than 1,000 homes, soon joined forces with STOP.

That was the start of a struggle that eventually led to the scrapping of the Mount Hood Freeway, and a sea change in the way Portlanders view transportation.

"All we wanted was to get this line off the map so we could fix up some houses," Howell said. The next question was where to spend the \$500 million in federal money set aside for the project. The money was ultimately spent upgrading Interstate 84, building the first MAX light-rail line to Gresham, and many other projects.

But killing the Mount Hood Freeway did not automatically lead to the birth of MAX. Light rail was an unknown quantity in those days, and politicians from Mayor Goldschmidt on down were leery.

In fact, state officials eliminated light rail as an option in 1976, a move supported by TriMet, **Portland**, and other local governments.

"But we kept talking about light rail," said Howell, who served on a citizen advisory committee. The Multnomah County commissioners urged Gov. Bob Straub to keep the idea alive.

The first MAX line opened a decade later, but few people realize "it had been lost and it came back," Howell said.

Cross-town bus service

Howell next turned his attention to the bus system, which consisted almost entirely as radial spokes leaving downtown. He pushed for a grid system of cross-town routes.

He worked for TriMet from 1978 to 1985, designing the first timed transfer system for the west side.

Howell gives Hansen credit for focusing on express buses, but he says TriMet still needs better cross-town service, particularly in the suburbs.

In 1985, Howell launched a bus company with fellow TriMet employee Doug Allen. Citizens for Better **Transit** ran vans between **Portland** and the coast after Greyhound stopped serving Tillamook.

"It was an opportunity to try out some of our theories," Howell said.

Howell and Allen pushed ridership from Greyhound's 300 a month to 1,000 a month. In 1990, they sold out to Raz Transportation after failing to get state financing for an expansion of service.

Howell, as strategic planner for Association of Oregon Rail and **Transit** Advocates, is as immersed in controversy as ever.

In 2002, Howell proposed an elevator and tunnel "people mover" between Oregon Health & Science University and the South Waterfront. It was rejected because the \$50 million price tag was too high. Cost estimate for the tram now under construction: \$57 million.

But his current passion is the Columbia River Crossing Project, the proposal by the Washington and Oregon transportation agencies to build a new I-5 bridge.

Howell has tirelessly promoted the idea that the panel should also study an arterial bridge --a secondary span --to carry local traffic and light rail.

Although his plan hasn't gotten much traction, he's not been defeated by the appearance of a done deal, citing his experience with thwarting such "done deals" as Harbor Drive.

"We win one once in a while," he said.

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