

Portland Bicycle Advisory Committee

Working to Make Bicycling a Part of Daily Life in Portland

1001 SW 5th Avenue, Room 1300
Portland OR 97204



October 19th, 2021

Chris Warner, Director
Portland Bureau of Transportation

Dear Director Warner,

The Portland Bicycle Advisory Committee (BAC) is charged with advising the Portland Bureau of Transportation (PBOT) and City Council on issues relating to bicycling in Portland. In this instance we find ourselves in a position where it is necessary to provide feedback regarding an outside organization that is not tied to a transportation project. We are asking for your support to open up clear lines of communication with Portland Public Schools (PPS) leadership to support their transportation needs. This letter details issues identified by the BAC, in alignment with the City's and bureau's policies and goals and proposes solutions where PBOT can play an active role.

Opening up schools during the pandemic has clearly presented many challenges, one of which has been student transportation. Many bus routes have been permanently cancelled while others are subject to notifications less than an hour before school starts or during the school day leading to challenging situations for students and families. Unfortunately, PPS has made the active decision to address this situation by doubling down on the most dangerous forms of transportation and omitting safe and sustainable options.

It is necessary to be specific about the dangers of the approach that has been taken by PPS. PBOT has committed to a Vision Zero which calls for eliminating all traffic deaths and serious injuries. As of October 7th, there have been 51 deaths in 2021¹, the third straight year where that number has exceeded 50. The significance of this cannot be understated as traffic violence disproportionately impacts Portland's BIPOC communities² and is one of the top causes of death for people ages 5-24³. There is a strong correlation between the number of vehicle miles traveled and the number of crashes that lead to serious injury or death and messaging that encourages more driving will increase the risk of a crash happening on the way to or from school. A key point to note is that much of the danger is borne by people walking to or from school as they do not have the benefit of a multi-ton steel cage protecting them nor are they as easy to see from the driver's seat of increasingly large vehicles with significant blind spots. In addition, the staffing shortages impacting bus drivers, combined with COVID restrictions, has created inconsistency in the deployment of crossing guards at crosswalks near schools. There are some schools with better coverage than before the pandemic and others where crossing support is virtually non-existent based on the prioritization given to the issue by each principal.

¹ <https://bikeportland.org/fatality-tracker>

² <https://www.portland.gov/sites/default/files/2021/2020-vision-zero-traffic-crash-report.pdf>

³ https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/LeadingCauses_images.html

In the September 17th email⁴ to parents titled “School Bus Driver Shortage Update: Several Bus Routes to be Canceled; PPS Continues to Work on Solutions” alternatives were listed as: “Reducing our number of big bus routes from 140 to 101”; “Maximizing use of smaller vehicles through contracted external providers”; “Discussions with business and state-level officials to provide human resources; “Providing families impacted by canceled routes with financial support”; “Use of family friendly technology to coordinate family car pooling efforts.” The email even goes so far as to recruit anyone interested in applying to be a bus driver. This is consistent with the three other emails that have gone out to PPS parents where the only potential non-car or bus solution was a vague reference to “using other transportation methods.”

A week later, on September 24th, students from across PPS left school for a Climate Strike. Pre-empting this was an email from PPS touting Climate Justice, measures that have been taken, and the district’s vision in PPS reimagined⁵. That document contains 20 references to climate change yet only one, in the appendix, of transportation which is responsible for 40% of Oregon’s carbon emissions. Many of the student demands in the strike were centered on a more sustainable and just transportation system that is green and carbon neutral (by 2035). Maintaining a focus on cars, vans, and smaller buses serves as a step backwards from where we need to go.

The League of American Bicyclists is guided by the five E’s of transportation⁶: Equity, Diversity & Inclusion, Engineering, Education, Encouragement, and Evaluation & Planning. PBOT works to address each of these through policies and programs that impact every person in the bureau. Encouragement is possibly the simplest E to implement as it does not require a buildout of infrastructure, detailed research, extensive outreach, or a significant budget to make an impact. In fact, it could be done in a few sentences and expanded from there.

To date the only encouragement PPS has provided to parents is that they will need to drive their children to school when a bus is unable to pick them up. This has led to situations where there is severe congestion around schools and buses have been delayed coming to and from schools because of an increased number of cars on the road idling as they wait for students to be unloaded from other cars or dismissed from school. There are more idling cars near families walking or rolling to and from school, absenteeism has increased due to less resilient transportation plans, and there is frustration from all parties as solutions are not intuitive. This is not sustainable, nor does it place anyone in a position to succeed. A better path forward is needed.

PBOT’s Safe Routes to Schools (SRTS) team has been active to address the critical need that has been identified during the first month of school. Activities include partnering with district and school staff to organize walking and biking groups, carpools (SchoolPool), circulation guidance & maps, and communications & resources regarding active transportation that has been shared with school staff & families. School Streets is also being piloted at five schools with the impact being closely monitored. However, these efforts have been ad hoc and generally initiated at the request of a Principal or other

⁴ <https://www.pps.net/site/default.aspx?PageType=3&DomainID=4&ModuleInstanceID=1492&PageModuleInstanceID=1594&ViewID=ad4d6d9d-7046-48e7-a548-a6a23a68d076&RenderLoc=0&FlexDataID=168056&PageID=1>

⁵ https://www.pps.net/cms/lib/OR01913224/Centricity/Domain/219/PPS_Vision_Final.pdf

⁶ <https://www.bikeleague.org/5-Es>

agent of a school. This is not an equitable approach nor does it scale without clear, consistent messaging from the top down with support for parents, teachers, and administrators.

The BAC is recommending the following approach from PPS, understanding that PBOT does not have jurisdiction within PPS's inner workings, to provide a just, resilient, more sustainable, and consistent approach to transportation both during and after this bus driver shortage.

1. Engage with PBOT SRTS staff to deploy transportation resources at a district-wide level so programs are available to all schools, not only ones that know to ask.
2. Immediately and consistently encourage active modes of transportation in communications with students, parents, and staff. Clear references to walking, bicycling, and even remote drop-offs/Park & Walks as viable options are necessary to prevent parents from defaulting to driving students to a designated drop-off area that will be overtaxed from excess demand.
3. Participate in transportation events that encourage sustainable modes. October 6th was International Walk+Roll to School day and there was no mention from PPS about this event. November 17th is Ruby Bridges Walk to School Day and Bike to School Day is in May.
 - a. These events can show people how accessible walking (or biking) is as an option or identify barriers which can then be used by PBOT to prioritize projects to improve infrastructure.
4. Provide guidelines outlining the level of support the district is providing at marked crossings at the beginning and end of each school day that are aligned to the expectation that Third through Fifth graders are able to walk without parental supervision.

The omissions that have been highlighted in this letter are all too common and hard to identify when this is not a point of focus. It is our hope that PBOT and Safe Routes to Schools partnerships can provide their very capable support to help PPS meet this moment.

Respectfully,



David Stein, Chairperson
Bicycle Advisory Committee



Alexandra Holmqvist, Vice Chairperson
Bicycle Advisory Committee

cc: Janis McDonald, Dana Dickman, Dan Jung, Teri Brady, Claire Hertz, Michelle DePass