



## From Boone Ferry to Boondoggle: It Tolls for Thee



*Tolling. The very utterance of the word can amp up blood pressure, twitch yer fingers, and blur yer vision. Around these parts, it's been known to downright cause a man to lose the wits about him.*

*Jesse Boone, the great-grandson of pioneer legend Daniel Boone, knew about tolls. He and that there family of his operated the Boone Ferry in Wilsonville for a mighty long time. You had to pony up to get your wagon and stock over that Willamette River back then. Lot of folks thought he charged too much for them tolls. Poor Jesse. In 1972, a neighbor shot him dead right there by the river. Seems that tollin' just to shu your sheep around was a little too much for some folk. I reckon that is why we haven't seen any tolls in this neck of the woods ever since.*

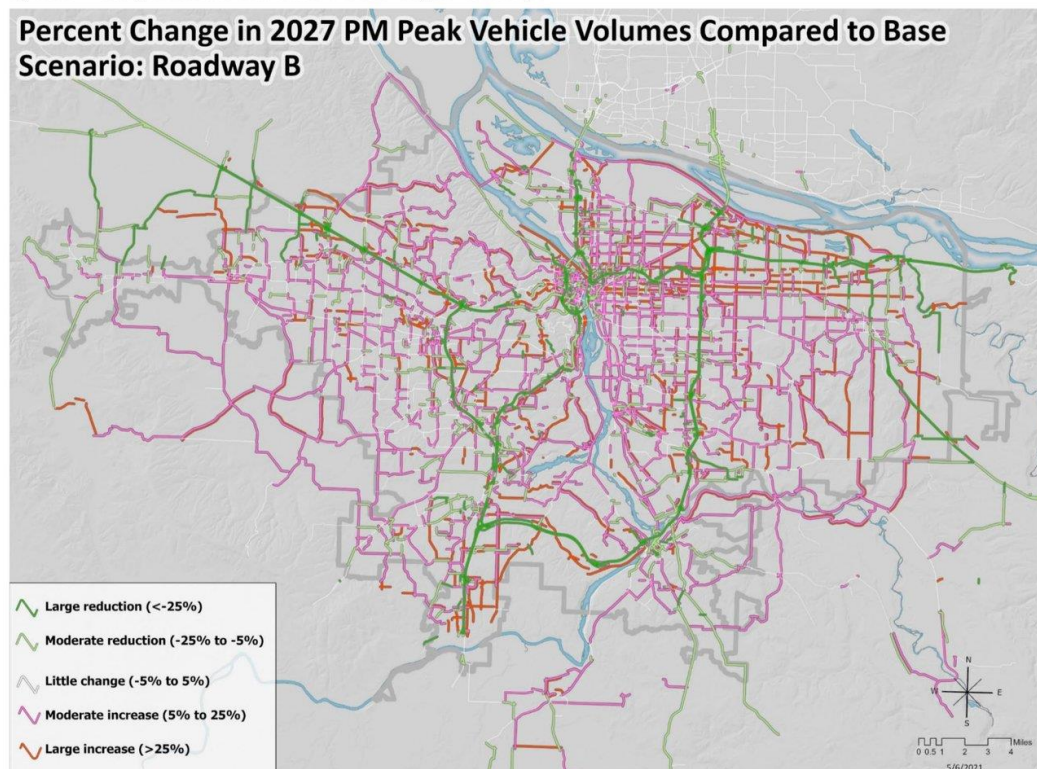
*Now I hear folks are making quite a ruckus again, back at that same Boone Bridge and everywhere else in the territory. A group of boys from a place called ODOT are in town aiming to start that tollin' stuff all o'er again. Don't know how all this is gonna turn out, but I know one thing, if folk up there care about this, it's no time to be part of a herd of sheep.*

---

The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) is set to begin tolling bridges in the South Metro area next year and then install additional per-mile tolls all along I-5 and I-205. That adds up to about 40 or more tolls motorists will face when they utilize the not-so-freeways in the Portland area.

ODOT says the plan is designed to meet a legislative mandate to reduce traffic congestion on Portland area freeways. They appear to have adopted a winning strategy. Lining I-5 and I-205 with toll booths could transform the freeways from congested to deserted as commuters head to the 40-plus offramps along the freeways to squeeze the congestion to local arterials, neighborhoods, and school zones. This is especially ironic considering ODOT recently approved millions to address [Safe Routes to Schools](#) to potentially make them less safe than ever before.

Figure 33 Change in 2027 PM Peak Vehicle Volumes - Region - Roadway B



Portland Metro Congestion Pricing Study | July 2021

[A study by Metro just two years ago](#) predicted an average of 25% or more congestion in neighborhoods across the region. The pink and orange lines represent that congestion. The attendant safety, pollution, and livability concerns that will arise from squeezing Portland freeway congestion into neighborhoods have residents up in arms. Websites have sprung up to try and strategize how to stop the ODOT Express before it is too late to apply the brake.

ODOT also wants to raise revenues to use for future mega-transportation projects. It is a perilous endeavor as tolling revenues have proven volatile nationwide, especially where alternative routes are readily available, as in Portland. Already facing a financial crunch due to declining gas tax revenues resulting from more efficient cars and migration to electric vehicles, ODOT plans to issue 30-year bonds backed by tolls that may not meet expectations for revenue to pay for projects that increasingly exceed expectations by 200 to 300% more than the initial estimated in cost of delivery. It is a recipe to destabilize the agency's budget and have it fall on the Legislature's and taxpayers' mercy to bail it

out. A decrease in inflows and an increase in outflows sounds like the epitaph of Silicon Valley Bank.

Only three years after Washington built the SR99 toll road in Seattle, it is performing well under expectations to meet its debt obligations. [The State Treasurer recently announced](#) that in the years to come, the SR99 deficit will approach a quarter of a billion dollars requiring a taxpayer bailout if the State wants (and must) keep its' bond rating intact.



ODOT might need to rename itself the "Oregon Department of Tolling."

Of course, we are talking engineers, accountants, and planners here, not political visionaries. That is expected, but agency leadership should have calculated things with a more astute pencil and recognized the adverse reaction they would generate. When the Legislature authorized tolling, they may very well have thought that meant ODOT would put up two or three toll areas, evaluate the results over 18 months for revenue measurements versus expectations, evaluate road diversion and issues associated with the diversion to calibrate future installations better, and win public support with the results. Instead of a couple of scouting crews, they launched an entire battalion, catching most legislators off-guard. They did not truly understand that ODOT's definition of Congestion Pricing was taking the whole system hostage with a full-out assault. As a cake-topper, the planned tolls on I-205 by the Abernethy Bridge and the Tualatin Bridge are set to light up and cash out drivers in the fall of next year — right before the General Election.

[Louisville, Ky., went all-out on tolling](#) when it decided that a congested bridge over the Ohio River with six lanes would be solved by spending more than a billion dollars on six more lanes and paying for it with tolls. Despite charging only \$1 to \$2 to get people to use it, the bridge has become a deserted stretch of concrete most of the time. The picture below was taken just after 5 p.m. on a typical weekday.



Instead of a congested bridge, they have a mile-long bowling alley. Even a dollar a day has not brought them all back. The idea of congestion pricing is to reduce vehicles on freeways, not eliminate them by diverting them to other crossings weaving through neighborhoods along the way.

By going all in all the time, ODOT is threatening its financial stability and the ability to perform essential maintenance functions.

Trying to do it much too fast can cause serious problems. Too bad Jesse Boone was not around to advise them. What's that saying? "Those who don't study history are bound ..."

*Look for Part 2: A Solution to the Madness on Thursday, April 6, 2023.*