



# **Lane Transit District West 11th Expansion Communication Assessment**

**Fall 2012 • Journalism**

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Sustainable Cities Initiative

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## About SCI

The Sustainable Cities Initiative (SCI) is a cross-disciplinary organization at the University of Oregon that promotes education, service, public outreach, and research on the design and development of sustainable cities. We are redefining higher education for the public good and catalyzing community change toward sustainability. Our work addresses sustainability at multiple scales and emerges from the conviction that creating the sustainable city cannot happen within any single discipline. SCI is grounded in cross-disciplinary engagement as the key strategy for improving community sustainability. Our work connects student energy, faculty experience, and community needs to produce innovative, tangible solutions for the creation of a sustainable society.

## About SCYP

The Sustainable City Year Program (SCYP) is a year-long partnership between SCI and one city in Oregon, in which students and faculty in courses from across the university collaborate with the partner city on sustainability and livability projects. SCYP faculty and students work in collaboration with staff from the partner city through a variety of studio projects and service-learning courses to provide students with real-world projects to investigate. Students bring energy, enthusiasm, and innovative approaches to difficult, persistent problems. SCYP's primary value derives from collaborations resulting in on-the-ground impact and expanded conversations for a community ready to transition to a more sustainable and livable future. SCYP includes courses in Architecture; Arts and Administration; Business; Economics; Journalism; Landscape Architecture; Law; Oregon Leadership in Sustainability; and Planning, Public Policy, and Management.

## About Lane Transit District (LTD)

Since 1970, Lane Transit District has provided transportation services to Eugene-Springfield and the surrounding communities of Coburg, Junction City, Creswell, Cottage Grove, Veneta, and Lowell. Beginning with 20 vehicles, LTD today carries roughly 11.5 million customers annually with a fleet of 104 buses, which includes both standard and low-floor buses, in length of 30-foot, 40-foot, and 60-foot articulated buses for regular services. Among those 104 vehicles, 11 of those are 60-foot bus rapid transit (BRT) vehicles used for EmX service. All LTD buses have been wheelchair-accessible since 1985. The district currently operates 45 hybrid-electric buses.

A board of directors, whose members are appointed by the Governor, governs LTD. A combination of passenger fares, payroll taxes, and state and federal monies fund the system.

## Course Participants

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## Executive Summary

In the fall of 2012, LTD engaged a team of 10 public relations students from the University of Oregon to conduct research to determine why there was such strong opposition to the proposed BRT expansion project along West 11th Avenue in Eugene, and how LTD's communication strategies and techniques could be improved.

The team determined that LTD's biggest challenge was a lack of communication between LTD, "Our Money Our Transit" (OMOT), and the West 11th Avenue businesses. This communication vacuum created a space for the opposition group OMOT to organize and build support among affected businesses by spreading information that wasn't necessarily accurate. These inaccuracies were never, or ineffectively, refuted, allowing OMOT to dominate communications about the project.

## Introduction

In the fall of 2006, the Lane Transit District proposed an expansion project that would add a third bus rapid transit route (BRT) called EmX west from their main transit station in downtown Eugene, Oregon. The eventual route selected would run along West 11th Avenue. Since proposing the project, LTD worked closely with the City of Eugene to plan and refine the project. In September 2012, the Eugene City Council provided final approval for the project by a 7-1 vote.

As with the development of EmX's two previous bus routes, LTD engaged and informed the public and business owners along the proposed corridor throughout the planning process, including answering any questions businesses might have about the project details. LTD also made an effort to outline project plans on their website.

Unlike the first two routes, however, LTD encountered organized opposition to their proposed EmX expansion route from several groups with the goal of stopping the project.

In the fall of 2012, LTD engaged a team of 10 public relations students from the University of Oregon to conduct research to determine why there was such strong opposition to the proposed BRT expansion project along West 11th Avenue, and how LTD's communication strategy could be improved.

The students' research involved two activities: The first was to accumulate communications from and about LTD regarding the expansion project and to illustrate the communications on a comprehensible timeline.

These communications include documents from LTD, Our Money Our Transit (OMOT), Residents for Responsible Rapid Transit (RRRT), the Eugene City Council and West 11th Avenue businesses.



Figure 1: Our Money Our Transit (OMOT) bus billboard (Source: [www.ourmoneyourtransit.com](http://www.ourmoneyourtransit.com))

The team also conducted qualitative interviews with selected businesses along the West 11th Avenue corridor to determine when and how opposition to the BRT project developed.

The second part of the project was to understand trends in the data to determine if and where LTD communications might have been lacking, or might have sparked the creation of opposition groups.

This report includes details regarding information presented as part of the timeline, the reasons for opposition from the owners of businesses on West 11th Avenue, an analysis of trends, and recommendations for LTD regarding communications with the public during future projects.



Figure 2: Members of the community voice their opinion of EMX expansion project in Eugene, April 2011. (Source: [blogs.dailyemerald.com](http://blogs.dailyemerald.com))



## Timeline of Events

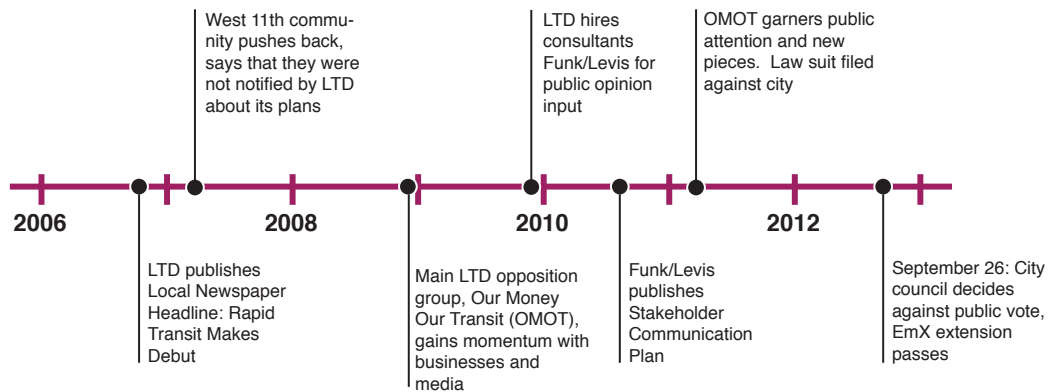


Figure 3: Summary timeline of major communication events in the EmX expansion controversy from 2006 to 2012

The research team developed a timeline of LTD’s actions from 2006 to 2012 to help identify trends in LTD’s communications regarding the proposed West Eugene BRT route. The timeline is presented in chronological order, beginning with the completion of LTD’s first BRT line connecting Eugene and Springfield.

### Late 2006

In the fall of 2006, *The Register-Guard* published the headline, “The first of the LTD rapid transit buses makes its debut.” Around the same time, City Councilor Bonny Bettman expressed concern that the language used for a proposed motion was definitive in identifying West 11th Avenue as the priority for the next EmX corridor.



Figure 4: Eugene City Councilor Bonny Bettman (Source: <http://dailyemerald.com>)

### Early 2007

Beginning in winter 2006 and lasting for at least a year, businesses and residents along West 11th Avenue claimed that they were not notified by LTD about its plans to expand BRT towards the West Eugene corridor. Throughout this time, details about route locations remained a contentious issue within the community.

### Late 2007

In fall of 2007 LTD published an EmX Newsletter titled the “Lane Transit District EmX West Eugene Corridor.” The newsletter included information about why the West Eugene corridor should be expanded and a preliminary process timeline. It determined the project initiation period was scheduled to begin in fall of 2007.

At this time Councilor Bettman said that unless the City was willing to provide incentives or subsidize mass transit and efficient alternative modes, there would be no progress toward sustainability.

## Early 2008

About one year later in winter 2008, Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy noted the positive international recognition LTD had received recently for its EmX system. LTD's EmX Monthly Newsletter at this time was published on the topic "Scoping adoption" and discussed alternatives that still needed to be studied including: purposes, needs, statements, evaluation, and framework.



*Figure 5: Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy  
(Source: [www.usmayors.org](http://www.usmayors.org))*

## Mid 2008

About six months later in summer 2008, Residents for Responsible Rapid Transit (RRRT), a community group that formed a year earlier in 2007, expressed concern that LTD might not be considering the factual issues RRRT had raised during the process to identify a West Eugene EmX route. In 2008 RRRT presented their concerns about the lack of consideration of proper data to both the Eugene City Council and LTD.

## Early 2009

Approximately six months later in winter 2009, Eugene City Councilor Alex Zelenka mentioned that the EmX project was being constructed almost entirely with state and federal dollars; only seven percent of the project cost would be locally funded (LTD Documents). LTD's EmX Monthly Newsletter published at this time focused on the topic "Public and agencies comment on Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS)." The newsletter describes how the public and government agencies reviewed and commented on the DEIS, including information about a public hearing.



*Figure 6: Eugene City Councilor Alan Zelenka  
(Source: [www.dpo.org](http://www.dpo.org))*

## Mid 2009

Later that year, the EmX Monthly Newsletter published on the topic "Select preferred alternatives." In it, the newsletter outlined

opportunities for the public and government agencies to share their input during the remainder of the project.

### **Late 2009**

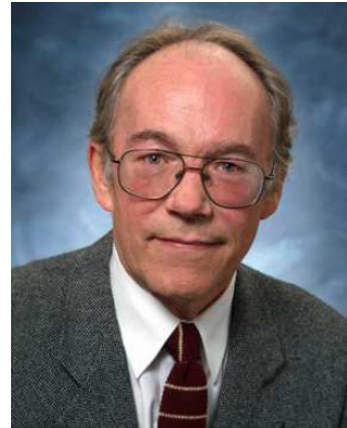
In fall 2009 Eugene City Councilor Andrea Ortiz hosted a business outreach event for LTD at Plaza Latina and hoped that business owners would take advantage of opportunities to provide input on transit issues. When Eugene City Councilor George Brown attended the event, he was left wishing more information about the “no build” option for the West Eugene EmX had been presented.



*Figure 7: Eugene City Councilor Andrea Ortiz (Source Blogger.com)*

### **Early 2010**

Later that year, LTD presented further opportunities for the public and government agencies to give input through public forums. At this time, LTD hired the public relations and advertising agency Funk/Levis & Associates to offer suggestions for including public opinion input in the development process.



*Figure 8: Eugene City Councilor George Brown (Source: City of Eugene)*

### **Mid 2010**

In the spring of 2010 the community group Our Money Our Transit (OMOT) began to organize against LTD’s West Eugene expansion project. OMOT distributed information around the city of Eugene, both traditionally and on social media. OMOT purchased advertising space in *The Register-Guard* newspaper.

A few months later in the summer of 2010, Funk/Levis & Associates presented a Stakeholder Report to LTD detailing a comprehensive communication plan. LTD’s Tom Schwetz indicated that Funk/Levis recommended an “alternatives analysis approach” that included public input opportunities and a committee of citizens from the affected area. Eugene Transportation Planning Engineer Chris Henry suggested publicly that the West Eugene EmX route could improve both traffic and business along the corridor.



*Figure 9: Funk/Levis & Associates Company Logo (Source: www.funklevis.com)*

## Late 2010

Six months after beginning their well-publicized dispute with LTD, OMOT began formulating talking points for the “No Build” campaign highlighted by “Concerns from Citizens of Lane County.” As part of this vocal outcry, OMOT placed more advertisements in *The Register-Guard* and staged two public protests on October 1 and November 9 along the West 11th corridor. In response to these public actions, Mayor Piercy met with OMOT representatives to discuss their concerns.

## Early 2011

Throughout the next year OMOT’s strong media presence continued on the radio and in *The Register-Guard*. The group revamped their promotional materials to include new signs, flyers, and buttons.

During this time, City Councilors Zelenka and Taylor met with OMOT representatives. After these meetings, Councilor Zelenka reported that the input from West Eugene EmX extension opponents gave him “food for thought.”

Mayor Piercy acknowledged that LTD was working to decrease the negative impacts of the route on businesses and residents, but she did not want LTD’s efforts, in that regard, to work against the goal of achieving a viable public transit system. In her “State of the City” speech, Mayor Piercy said,

“Eugene moved along our public transit system vision for the future. We know that EmX enables us to achieve a number of council and community goals in terms of accessible transportation, transit-oriented development, greenhouse gas reduction, and reduced reliance on fossil fuels. We’re part of the process to determine the preferred way to extend EmX out into West Eugene, and we’re working out way through community concerns to find the right solutions.”

Community members at the speech responded by saying there was a “failure to communicate” by Lane Transit District. One community member in attendance stated, “...it is too bad that business has not been included in the decision. The businesses feel disenfranchised.” Another community member in attendance stated, “...I am not an LTD puppet. I am not going to be taken in by a slick salesman who keeps changing his stories.”

## Mid 2011

In the spring of 2011, about three months after the Mayor’s speech, OMOT began garnering more public attention when KEZI-TV produced segments regarding OMOT’s efforts on the local news. At this same time, OMOT filed a lawsuit against LTD and the City of Eugene and their legal teams began to publicly engage in the issue.





Figure 10: OMOT “No Build” logo (Source: Our Money Our Transit)

During this public clash, LTD removed its Facebook page due to offensive/explicit public comments posted by OMOT supporters and disgruntled members of the community.

When asked about the EmX project, Oregon Congressman Peter DeFazio said, “...when the West Eugene EmX route was first proposed a few years ago, I urged LTD and local officials to meet with Tri-Met and its partners in Portland to learn how they managed the construction phase of the Interstate Max Line. Tri-Met had great success minimizing disruptions and impacts on businesses along the route. Regrettably, my admonitions were ignored.”



Figure 11: U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, Oregon's 4th Congressional District (Source: Wikipedia)

### **Late 2011**

Six months later LTD published the West Eugene EmX Extensions Update Newsletter and hired a consulting group (DHM Research) to conduct EmX West Eugene Extension focus groups. At the same time, OMOT escalated their advertising campaign and began placing ads on LTD busses.

### **Mid 2012**

In Summer 2012, bills passed in the Oregon State House and Senate that addressed transportation jobs as well as required a reduction of greenhouse gasses. These bills put pressure on the Eugene City Council and worked in LTD's favor.

### **Late 2012**

On September 26, 2012 the Eugene City Council decided against a public vote on the EmX extension and voted 7-1 to approve the West 11th Avenue EmX extension.

## Business Interviews

To better understand where communication breakdowns might have occurred between LTD and the businesses on West 11th Avenue that opposed the expansion project, the student research team interviewed owners of several businesses along the corridor. Each business contacted was asked three questions:

1. “What is your reason for opposing the expansion project?”
2. “When did you first hear about the expansion project?”
3. “How did you hear about the expansion project?”



Figure 12: “No Build” sign next to Arby’s Restaurant on West 11th, Eugene (Source: 3.bp.blogspot.com/)

The businesses that responded to our interview request were:

- Arby’s Restaurant (3865 W 11th Ave Eugene, OR 97402)
- Cole’s Furniture (2760 W 11th Ave Eugene, OR 97402)
- Dex’s Deli (3570 W 11th Ave, Eugene, OR 97402)
- The Eldorado Club (3000 W 11th Ave Eugene, OR 97402)
- Les Schwab Tire Center (2295 W 11th Ave Eugene, OR 97402)
- Kentucky Fried Chicken (3175 W 11th Ave Eugene, OR 97402)
- Napa Auto Parts-Emerald Valley Auto Parts (3360 W 11th Ave, Eugene, OR 97402)
- Simon’s Top Quality Auto Body (4079 W 11th Ave, Eugene, OR 97402)

This list of businesses does not include every business that demonstrated opposition to LTD, but these businesses were willing to talk about their opposition to the project.

Our interviews showed that businesses felt there was not enough interaction from LTD. They chose to side with OMOT because OMOT made strong and repeated efforts to influence their decision, while LTD contacted each business just once. Respondents claimed to understand the basics of the project, but did not feel like their questions and concerns were answered by LTD, leading them to side with OMOT.

Respondents mentioned that they understood information was out there that could answer their questions, but felt that LTD should have been more available to answer those questions for them, and not leave it up to the businesses to do their own research. Half of the businesses we talked to said if the economy was in a better state, they would have been in favor of the expansion project. They feared construction costs and road closures in a down economy could put them in a very bad spot. Respondents didn’t know that LTD had already received government funding for the project, and that construction plans did not include blocking business entrances.

## Analysis

The West 11th Avenue EmX extension project had early support from the Eugene City Council and Mayor Kitty Piercy, who was a major supporter. As the planning process proceeded and LTD began sharing information with constituents, businesses along the corridor felt their questions and concerns were not addressed by LTD or the City Council. They began displaying their frustration by erecting signs along the corridor and making accusations that LTD ignored public opinion.

LTD consistently produced information for the public in newsletters and on their website. When information was produced by LTD, it was at times complicated and used confusing language. It was also difficult to locate. LTD made efforts to improve communication by consulting with Funk/Levis & Associates. LTD only began paying attention to OMOT once they gained significant momentum with businesses and media in 2009.

OMOT initiated a very visual campaign that could not be ignored by the public. They put up more than 100 signs along the proposed corridor. They placed advertisements in *The Register-Guard* as well as on LTD busses. They coordinated public protests and received significant media attention. OMOT gained momentum with West 11th Avenue businesses by undercutting LTD with more personal and persistent communication.

When examining trends discovered in their research, the public relations team drew several conclusions.

- LTD communications tended to be complex and filled with an overwhelming amount of data. The nature of transit engineering projects made this difficult to avoid. These communications were released early in the process, usually before the plan was actually solidified. This was typified by the example of releasing the 2011 Origin/Destination Study without releasing a corresponding key messages memo for the casual viewer.
- Communication from the opposition, mainly OMOT, tended to be very concise and powerfully worded. Their tactic of appealing to fear with short slogans proved to stick easily in the mind of the public. This was typified by the advertisements placed on LTD buses.
- Outside influences changed the needs of the audience from what they were at the beginning of the project. The economy declined and social media became very powerful. While LTD acknowledged these factors, their actions and messages in the situation did not reflect the importance of these influences. This led some to feel that they were ignored and misunderstood by LTD. For example, LTD shut down their Facebook page rather than responding to negative comments.

## Recommendations

After examining trends discovered from their research, the public relations team developed several recommendations for the district to improve communication efforts in the future.

- **More active and strategic use of social media.** LTD's Facebook site was shut down after numerous negative comments. We suggest creating project-specific pages, posting rules about profanity and abuse of other users, and addressing negative comments as they arise. Negative comments that are made repeatedly can be addressed in an original post to the page so that it is more likely to be seen. In addition, LTD should make comments on other pages. This can be done to rally supporters and to address inconsistencies on the pages belonging to opposition organizations.
- **More focus on vision and key messages.** Much of the information that LTD used is very technical and easily misinterpreted. While that information should still be released to the public for the sake of transparency, greater emphasis on overall vision of the goal, as well as easy-to-understand key messages should be promoted to the public.
- **More face-to-face contact with businesses.** The opposition put much of their effort into personal contact with businesses. This personal contact, coupled with misinformation distributed by OMOT that wasn't refuted by LTD, led many businesses to oppose the project. To address this in the future, LTD should assign employees to go to each individual business that is affected, personally address their concerns, and have easy-to-understand information ready to distribute.

The research team strongly believes that if these recommendations are used for future projects, LTD will see significant improvement in their communication with stakeholders along any proposed new corridors.



## Conclusion

It was concluded by the team of students that LTD allowed the opposition to form and grow significantly due to poor efforts to communicate with the public. Ultimately, the project will likely be completed as it has the support of City Council. In the future, LTD needs to make a stronger effort to stay engaged with businesses and members of their community so they can keep everyone informed with the factual details. This will ensure that the community will understand the details of a project, and opposition won't develop biased on information that may or may not be true.

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