Jonathan Maus (00:00:00):

Welcome to the BikePortland Podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Maus. For this episode, I sat down with Yamhill County Commissioner and candidate for Oregon Governor, Casey Kulla. I first met Commissioner Kulla in December 2020, when he was embroiled in a debate about the Yamhelas West Side Trail, a rail trail project he pushed for strongly only to see it stopped in February of this year, when he found himself on the losing end of a two to one vote with his fellow commissioners fueled by the opposition of dozens of local farmers.

Jonathan Maus (00:00:29):

Kulla understood both sides of the issue because he runs a farm himself. Being a farmer in rural Oregon, who supports public land access and rail trail projects is just one of many facets of Kulla's background that give him a legitimate claim to being a rare Oregon politician, who just might be able to bridge the much talked about urban rural divide. From growing up in an evangelical household to working at a bike shop as a teenager on the Oregon coast and living car free during his college days in Bellingham, Washington, Kulla owns a diverse set of perspectives that have helped inform his collaborative and respectful approach to politics.

Jonathan Maus (00:01:07):

We talked about how surfing defines his political style, the perils of ecofascism, when it comes to tackling climate change, the limits of being nice in the face of extremism, how the Yamhelas West Side Trail project is like critical race theory, his ideas for reforming the Oregon Department of Transportation and much more. Here's our conversation. To help set some context for folks who don't know Casey Kulla. And I know you're not easily defined, and I know that you actually personally don't like labels and quick little, here's a progressive farmer from rural... Just really trite sort of ways of introducing politicians that are very label centric. I know you're not into that.

Casey Kulla (00:01:53):

Sure.

Jonathan Maus (00:01:54):

So, I'll let you do it. So, who is Casey Kulla? And not as a politician, we don't want to hear your pitch just yet, but-

Casey Kulla (00:01:59):

Totally.

Jonathan Maus (00:01:59):

... Casey Kulla as a person, who are you?

Casey Kulla (00:02:02):

It sounds terrible and I shouldn't say this, but in some ways, I spent my really young adult years as extremely introspective. I was raised in a conservative Baptist church, like an evangelical community. And there's a lot of introspection around sin, and guilt and your relationship with a deity. And so, I feel like I'm slowly learning to just be here in the community and observe the world. And that's an unsatisfying answer, but the maybe more specific is for the past 15 years, I've farmed with my wife full

time. And our community is focused around food and place, and knowing the landscape better and better. Yeah.

Jonathan Maus (00:02:47):

So, you born and raised in Oregon or...

Casey Kulla (00:02:48):

Yeah. So born and raised in Lincoln city.

Jonathan Maus (00:02:51):

Lincoln City. That's right.

Casey Kulla (00:02:52):

Yeah. So I spent a lot of time, I was a competitive swimmer because there was nothing to do, but there was a really nice pool. And so, I swam around the country. And then let's say, so my mom's a nurse, she still works full-time as a nurse, my dad was the city attorney and they saw the ocean in its darkest, most dangerous moments. The people pulled in lifeless, right?

Jonathan Maus (00:03:18):

Yeah.

Casey Kulla (00:03:18):

The suits against the city for people being swept out. And, but I had this thing where I was like, "I want to surf."

Jonathan Maus (00:03:26):

Yeah.

Casey Kulla (00:03:27):

And I don't know really where it came from, but I was like, "I want to be out there in the ocean," because it's really hard to be out in the ocean. It's cold, it's rough. And so, I set this plan where I was like, "Okay, I think that by time I'm 15, I bet I can convince my parents." And so, I started when I was 13, so this two year plan to convince them that I could surf. I considered my greatest negotiation [inaudible 00:03:49] my parents, who the ocean is where people go to die. Yeah. And I feel like that in many ways, then that has defined me in so many way is, is just that relationship with the ocean.

Jonathan Maus (00:04:02):

But relationship with land too, because I mean, you actually live on an island, which I find kind of fascinating.

Casey Kulla (00:04:07):

Right.

Jonathan Maus (00:04:08):

And, I had to look it up on Google Maps before you came over. Where do you live?

Casey Kulla (00:04:12):

Home of the Heiser Farms cyclocross.

Jonathan Maus (00:04:14):

I know, I saw that.

Casey Kulla (00:04:14):

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus (00:04:15):

So give folks an idea of like, how do you live it on island in rural Yamhill County [inaudible 00:04:19]-

Casey Kulla (00:04:19):

Right. So, the Willamette River traditionally spread across all of the Willamette Valley, braided channels. It would jump the bounds every winter and create new channels and one of those became a big Oxbow. And then in the 1880s, it got cut through and created an island and there's a bridge across to it. It's 3000 acres, altogether the island, which is to say it's like 15% the size of Sauvie Island. But, it's this amazing mix of exclusive [inaudible 00:04:51] land that's really, really productive. It's the best soil in the world, really for growing particular things. And it has the most water for irrigation purposes and yet at the same time, there's a thousand acres of lowland river forest, which is the cottonwood and ashes. And so, it's this mix of really intense industrial agriculture and also wild areas.

Jonathan Maus (00:05:14):

Neat.

Casey Kulla (00:05:14):

It's incredible.

Jonathan Maus (00:05:15):

It sounds really exclusive and I know it's not, but when you say you live on an island, I'm always like, "Oh my gosh, [crosstalk 00:05:20] it's going to be [inaudible 00:05:20 ." I'm thinking Florida or something. Okay.

Casey Kulla (00:05:22):

I love it.

Jonathan Maus (00:05:23):

So, what-

Casey Kulla (00:05:24):

There's always jokes about blowing up the bridge, if things get too wild, so.

Jonathan Maus (00:05:28):

So I want to get kind of more specific here, so tell me about... I think it's this one thing I always ask folks, is sort of like what's your personal/family, what's your relationship to transportation? What is your story around how you've gotten around most of your life, how you get around now?

Casey Kulla (00:05:43):

As a kid, I grew up on 101, Highway 101 is the route. And because the coast is a place that there's not a lot or there wasn't a lot happening in the 90s, the guy who opened the first bike store, the [inaudible 00:06:01] Bike Shop was like, "Hey, you want to build bikes for me?" And so, as a 14 and 15 year old, I would go in, I would say after classes, but it's not totally true. And I'd build bikes for a hundred dollars a bike, and which at the time was screaming, good money. And so, it became the opportunity to build a bike for myself, and start riding and have access.

Casey Kulla (00:06:26):

It's a freeing thing to be able to move around without requiring a parent or a car. So then, I started exploring the mountains, the coast range. So that's one part of my world is, negotiating and navigating Highway 101 as a young person, it was like the best way to learn about, as we talked about earlier, there are landscapes that are literally not safe for people.

Jonathan Maus (00:06:54):

And, I wonder if it started to stoke your fire for being an ODOT agitator and a transportation reform person.

Casey Kulla (00:07:02):

Yeah, I think so.

Jonathan Maus (00:07:03):

[inaudible 00:07:03] talk about [inaudible 00:07:03], but...

Casey Kulla (00:07:03):

Yeah. So, I moved to Bellingham, Washington for college and I realized recently when we took our kids kind of on a tour of Bellingham, that I didn't know how to get around in a car. I didn't know. I was like, "Okay, let's see, we want to go past the hospital." "How?" "Oh my gosh, I've never used a car to get there."

Jonathan Maus (00:07:23):

Yeah.

Casey Kulla (00:07:23):

It was a really weird thought.

Jonathan Maus (00:07:25):

[inaudible 00:07:25].

Casey Kulla (00:07:25):

But I think that I was trying to type this out the other day in a tweet, and I was realizing that because I see people not get radicalized by their cycling, but I don't think that's the appropriate term, develop a more intense relationship with the world. Maybe my wife and I became essentially radicalized pedestrians and cyclists, where my wife who's an amazing, compassionate, strong articulate person would pound her hand on the hoods of cars.

Casey Kulla (00:07:58):

Like, you are pulling front of me, bam.

Jonathan Maus (00:08:00):

Wow.

Casey Kulla (00:08:01):

And I just realized that, that's just how we live, but that's probably not how people live if they're not walking and cycling everywhere. So, we always lived in Downtown Bellingham when we were in college. And then when we were in graduate school as well, and then we lived in-between graduate school and undergrad, we lived in the mountains in an intentional community in the North Cascades in Washington. And there they were, the only vehicles were the vehicles that we drove down to the lake, to Lake Chelan, the 12 miles down to pick up food and luggage. And so I literally only drove a, we called it the two ton. It's weird to think that there are different points in your life when you can just not have to drive a car.

Casey Kulla (00:08:45):

And then even with the farm, for a while, with the intense level of, I've got a crew of five that I'm responsible for and we're delivering vegetables every week. I literally wouldn't leave the farm, except to drive the box truck, the 13 miles to town and back. And, I was putting 26 miles a week on the car. So, there's phases, right?

Jonathan Maus (00:09:08):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Casey Kulla (00:09:09):

But I mean, to put it back into the place that we are in now, what I know is that our landscapes are just so dangerous for people who aren't in cars and we don't have to have that.

Jonathan Maus (00:09:20):

No, we certainly don't have to have that. And I think that, that's one thing I find interesting about your perspective, is that you have a lot of different lived experiences. And especially as like a transportation oriented person, you also have a lot of different sort of transportation, modes and environments that you operated in. [crosstalk 00:09:37]

Casey Kulla (00:09:36):

Oh my gosh, yes. Including driving the tractor on the road.

Jonathan Maus (00:09:39):

Oh, there's... Okay, that's good.

Casey Kulla (00:09:40):

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus (00:09:40):

So I want to get into that too, but I think it's important for people to understand, because you are running for like the highest office in Oregon. How do you describe your political style?

Casey Kulla (00:09:51):

I always talk about it as you might think that I'm a moderate because we always get the best decision that's for everybody, the decision that's best for everybody out of any situation, but it's because I'm coming from the most progressive side of things and pushing it to make sure that we get something that works for everybody from that kind of side. So I find myself as like the, I start from a really, almost a radical position and work with everybody to find something that works. That's my political style.

Jonathan Maus (00:10:24):

Yeah.

Casey Kulla (00:10:25):

It's a kind of a...

Jonathan Maus (00:10:25):

I was weighing that against some of the research I did about you. And some of the interviews and just some of the policy work that I'm aware of. And, one thing that I've been intrigued by is your attempt to stay positive and respectful. Actually, you like to use the word loving, that you love your opponents and that you're not necessarily respecting people who disagree with you, but you just love people, which you have this sort of gift I think of being corny, but pulling it off somehow. I say you can be sort of corny and stuff, but pull it off.

Jonathan Maus (00:10:57):

I think there's some people that wouldn't say that. I mean, I think that speaks to where my political leanings are...

Casey Kulla (00:11:03):

Sure.

Jonathan Maus (00:11:04):

... in some ways, and I have a feeling that a lot of people would say you don't pull it off, but we'll maybe get to that later. But I just feel like that's, it's a laudable way to act. I find myself... I appreciate that perspective of respecting opponents and that's where the real magic is. And once you understand why people disagree with you and you can actually have a conversation with them, that doesn't devolve into yelling, you can actually make progress. But boy, I-

Casey Kulla (00:11:32):

And also, nothing's ever done. I feel like there's never...

Jonathan Maus (00:11:36):

Well...

Casey Kulla (00:11:36):

Like you get to a no and you're like, "This is just the beginning." Sorry to interrupt you...

Jonathan Maus (00:11:39):

Yeah.

Casey Kulla (00:11:39):

... I feel that's part of it.

Jonathan Maus (00:11:42):

It is. But I think you say that, but I know that there've been some people that you sort of gone up against who don't see it that way.

Casey Kulla (00:11:48):

Totally.

Jonathan Maus (00:11:48):

And I think there's a part of me that thinks that it's a laudable way to act, but that laudable part has its limits.

Casey Kulla (00:11:56):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jonathan Maus (00:11:56):

Or do you think it has limits? Because you can think about that for a sec, but on your website, you say that, "Extremism in politics is a threat to the most basic tenants of our society."

Casey Kulla (00:12:10):

Right.

Jonathan Maus (00:12:11):

Which I agree with and that, "Oregonians must stand up and say no, not here." But, extremism isn't always in the form of like a gun toting proud boy at a protest, like we've seen recently, I think extremism can happen behind the desk of an elected official. I mean, just this week in Newberg with the school board ousting the superintendent with no cause, no warning. And I think even to some degree with the controversial debate around the Yamhelas Westsider Trail, when you had elected officials in office making very accusatory comments about city staff, and doing things that a lot of people in the

community were very uncomfortable with and that person's now facing a recall, but we may talk about that in a minute. But so, that I feel like is also extremism.

Casey Kulla (00:12:57):

It is, absolutely. And, I'm talking to that.

Jonathan Maus (00:13:00):

Yeah. But so, I'm curious how you, as someone who has this approach, that's nice and collaborative and consensus, how do you justify that with people who are using that kind of extremism that you yourself said, "We must say no, not here?" How do you balance this idea that we must love our opponents, and respect them and work together on one hand. But then you also say that, "Political extremism is a huge threat to our system."

Casey Kulla (00:13:26):

Yep.

Jonathan Maus (00:13:27):

Can you meet that kind of extremism, even when it happens at a desk? Can you meet that with being nice? Are there limits to that?

Casey Kulla (00:13:36):

First of all, because I came from a world, I was raised in a world where everything was black and white, I'm totally comfortable with the tension of things being contradictory because we're all complicated. And, I don't think we know ourselves. I'm assuming that other people don't know themselves fully. And, I think that society is an organism, just like each of us is our own little organism. I have an oncology degree, so I see things as they're connected. And, one thing I really believe is that when you get... I feel compelled to work with people who are an elected office, because that's what people told us we should do. We said, "I want that person to work with me or to work with that person." But on the other side, so what I see is this, I don't think it's a dichotomy, but I think it's two ways of doing it.

Casey Kulla (00:14:39):

And I say that two ways of doing it, because that's what I do right now, which is when somebody is an elected office who is extreme, who does not represent the values of a community and really isn't looking out for everybody. And I comfortable saying that, you work with the community to remove them from office. That's just what you do. So, I was late because I was waiting to speak at the Newberg School Board, kind of rally. And, there were so many tears there and there were so many people who were like, "We are fighting back, we're pushing back and embracing our own community."

Jonathan Maus (00:15:23):

So instead of directing your, maybe it's anger, frustration, instead of directing your energy toward that person, who's disagreeing or doing something you don't think is right, you're saying you maintain sort of that political balance or respect. But then, you take that energy and direct it to the community-

Casey Kulla (00:15:45):

To the organizing.

Jonathan Maus (00:15:45):

... to the organizing and maybe you're a little bit more direct over there. Although, I have a feeling, I would be willing to bet that at that, when you made that speech in Newberg today, you weren't mentioning anybody by name and you were being very careful because I think that's just your style, which I think is going to be an unanswered question, in terms of how far that's going to take you.

Casey Kulla (00:16:04):

Yeah, for sure.

Jonathan Maus (00:16:05):

Especially since, we may even get a good test of that with Sandra Betsy Johnson being in the race, who also as a... Well, used to be a Democrat, sounds like she's going to change her party into independent, but she's... I don't know enough about Oregon politics to say that she has the opposite style of you, but she's certainly not known as somebody who...

Casey Kulla (00:16:24):

She's direct,

Jonathan Maus (00:16:25):

She's direct.

Casey Kulla (00:16:26):

So, I grew up in the political world as an organizer, an agitator around a [inaudible 00:16:34 , around a quarry, a gravel quarry. And so, what I've realized is that you can make all this decisions that you want in that space where you're, "The leader or the decision maker," but nothing's going to stick unless you have the community buy-in. And so, I feel like I'm always doing the community buy-in talks with people, talks with decision makers. So when you get into the room, it's all about just explaining your vote because you know it's going to happen.

Jonathan Maus (00:17:02):

Yeah. And then, that also brings up something for me, in terms of like you say that your number one priority is climate change.

Casey Kulla (00:17:08):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jonathan Maus (00:17:09):

Which if you look at your political style, I think you've actually said this, which is about building things up, building foundations, working on relationships, going to meet people where they are.

Casey Kulla (00:17:21):

Right.

Jonathan Maus (00:17:21):

All things that take a tremendous amount of time, but then you also say climate change is your top priority. Something that we don't have the luxury of waiting for that arc to bend, we've got to do that quickly. And I think that's the appeal of that other side on the right, let's say, the burn it down folks. The appeal is that they can do big things really quickly with that, right way of doing things. They can go and...

Casey Kulla (00:17:44):

They can tear it down really quickly.

Jonathan Maus (00:17:45):

They can get a majority, pass something without anybody knowing about it and move on, or they can stop a trail project, like happened here when they were in the majority. So that's another thing that, I guess, you're saying the way you'd sort of get around that is like, while you're doing maybe the slow build in the offices and with the...

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Jonathan Maus (00:18:03):

You're doing maybe the slow build in the offices and with the suits on, you're also trying to stoke the community to pressure more speed. How do you balance those two things, right?

Casey Kulla (00:18:10):

Yeah. I mean, absolutely. Climate change is and will be the ultimate test addressing it, really addressing it in a way that sticks will be the ultimate test, I believe, of our ability to have a democratic society. Because, you're right that we have to act with urgency, but we also have to make sure that everybody is on board at some point and has some stake in it because otherwise it will be the ultimate in eco fascism. I mean, to be honest. I see a lot of authoritarianism and a lot of proto-authoritarianism on the right, right now. It's because of the world that I inhabit, where people in positions of authority tell other people what to do that don't have any authority over essentially, is what I see a lot of and I see patterns of it throughout society. And essentially if we're saying we have to address climate change and there can't be any conversation about it, we have to do it. That is its own form of authoritarianism.

Casey Kulla (00:19:22):

The very first political speech that I gave speech, quote speech because I gave a talk to our Yamhill County Democrats. And then I wrote an op-ed after that was that climate change is ultimately always local and climate action has to be local as well. And so it looks different in every community, what people will chose to take on. And I do think that in some communities, it just has to be we're doing this to reduce the threat of wildfire here, or we're doing this to have more water in our community and that's where the state government and that's where the federal government comes in because we still need to do the reducing emissions. But there has to be something tangible that people benefit from in their own community.

Jonathan Maus (00:20:08):

It's sort of funny to me to hear you talk about local control. Because you say that's one of your main things that you talk about by saying we need local problems, local solutions.

Casey Kulla (00:20:17):

I try not to say local control though because that's... Sorry. I should let you go.

Jonathan Maus (00:20:21):

But still, talking about giving more power to people in local areas and just having sort of the state being this sort of framework and a funder and enabler, let's say. I think that's funny, I mean it's sort of a dichotomy to me because I know that some of your opponents probably think that you're doing the bidding of Metro, this regional planning authority. Which kind of brings me into the conversation about the Yamhelas Westsider Trail.

Casey Kulla (00:20:45):

Oh right. Way to segue.

Jonathan Maus (00:20:47):

Well in terms of people being concerned about governmental control. And I think a lot of the opposition to that was really about stopping Portland Creep and not being against the trail necessarily. But you also said the importance of bringing people on board, which I think is central to the issue with that trail. But before we get into a few questions about that, can you please share an elevator pitch? And I know nuance is really important to you, I'm the same way, but just in the interest of time and helping people get up to speed really quick to the last couple months, what happened there?

Casey Kulla (00:21:19):

Yeah. So the Yamhelas Westsider Trail was a project 20 years in the making to develop a footpath on 12 and a half miles of abandoned Union Pacific rail. And the county was able to purchase it and they applied to themselves, because that's the complicated thing, to put a trail in and as a conditionally used permit process, adjacent to farmland and they have to prove in that, that there's no significant impact to farms. I believe we met that test and kind of my thing all along is trails are good for people and they're good for the place, they're good for the communities. And we also can't be doing things that are going to harm farmers and we met that test, but then opposition arose to it. And in my view, opposition arose to it because people from other places and even with our community identified it as something that they could, like Critical Race Theory that they could use, it was be easy and they could fight against.

Jonathan Maus (00:22:17):

The one thing I remember listening to that commission, the Yamhill Board of Commissioners meeting on, I think, it was February 4th of this year, the big meeting where the decision happens four and a half hours. And that's the meeting where you essentially were in the minority with one vote and two people voted to basically tell the county it was time to scrap it and just stop progress on it and pay back the grants and all that stuff. Folks can read about that online, we're not going to get into all those details here.

Jonathan Maus (00:22:42):

But what struck me about that meeting though, was hearing Commissioner Lindsay Berschauer, and Commissioner Mary Starrett, just seemed, to me it's sort of the ultimate test of the [inaudible 00:22:54] principal. As they talked about it, they just had zero interest in discussing in terms of they didn't think it was going to be possible at all, they were not open to that possibility whatsoever. Hours before the vote

even happened I remember Berschauer saying something like we are stuck, there's no way out of this. Not to mention all the false and accusatory things she was saying, she was saying they're stuck, there's no way out of this. Commissioner Starrett said something, again, hours before the vote, so this is hours before there were supposed to be a debate and discussion, Commissioner Starrett said the train has left the station. So you were in a really impossible position, weren't you, on that debate?

Casey Kulla (00:23:35):

For sure. For sure. I held out hope, I will say, that we could come to a place. But it became clear that long ago their minds were set on it. I mean, I think about that all the time, I came back from our little cabin office to my son bawling, so hard for him. It was so hard for him to understand that something that was good, wasn't going to happen.

Jonathan Maus (00:24:12):

And he's old enough to have really understood what had just happened.

Casey Kulla (00:24:16):

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus (00:24:16):

It's like people in this community fighting for years for what your son probably thinks is a pretty cool thing, a rail trail that would get him around town on his bike without worrying about those high speed roads. And then he's old enough to probably, I'm imagining, eaves dropping in on that meeting and realizing that it was done.

Casey Kulla (00:24:35):

Yeah. One thing I've realized though, because I said, nothing's ever done. And I think that's one of the important things with community organizing, but it's also an important thing for decision makers when they're in the minority to understand is that it takes a lot more work, but it's not done.

Jonathan Maus (00:24:54):

Right. Just last month or in September, I think, there was a results of a survey that came out, and this was a survey by the Chehalem Park and Recreation District who-

Casey Kulla (00:25:06):

They paid $10,000 for a survey.

Jonathan Maus (00:25:08):

Professional survey, 400 respondents. It showed, what? 64% of people's support the trail. Only 16% of people's surveyed said they oppose it. And 20% said they weren't sure, so I think I would probably say 15% of those are going to support it once they learn more. So you do have a strong amount of support from people, that's what's important. And to me, it's been frustrating for some of the coverage and some of the commentary around the Yamhelas debate that talks about this is a great symbol of this urban rural divide. And I feel like they're just making it seem like a bigger divide than it really is. It seems to me we're talking about a few dozen powerful farmers and a lot of outside money who wants to just kill it for the principle of it.

Jonathan Maus (00:25:58):

I mean, I'm thinking specifically sort of like a big article in July in the High Country Mews, which a lot of people have read and for a lot of people they're only entry into the Yamhelas discussion. Do you agree with that framing in general? I mean, in terms of the trail, do you think the trail's a good illustration of the urban rural divide?

Casey Kulla (00:26:14):

No. My sense is that a small number of people hired themselves a candidate and they got what they wanted. And we have farmers, as you are probably very aware, farmers in Oregon and in many other places have wielded a lot of power to get what they want even when a community doesn't want the same thing. And it is clear all along that there was tremendous community support for this. I actually came into it, I ran for office being like, I don't know, let's look at the data. Let's find out if it's going to hurt farmers or if it's simply going to be positive for the community.

Jonathan Maus (00:26:56):

And despite all that, despite the fact that you support it so strongly, despite the fact that the facts are a lot of people support the trail. You even have regional elected officials, who've come to your side and said they really agree with the trail and they don't agree with how those other commissioners handled the issue. Even with that, I don't necessarily see you, and this gets back to our early conversation about political style, and maybe I've missed it but I haven't seen you sort of go on the offensive. I mean, you certainly have all the... You have all the right. I was going to say ammunition, but I don't like to use war and battle references in politics.

Casey Kulla (00:27:30):

I don't either.

Jonathan Maus (00:27:31):

So you have every-

Casey Kulla (00:27:32):

I kept myself from saying fight when I was at the [crosstalk 00:27:34] School Board.

Jonathan Maus (00:27:35):

It's tough because I know people relate to certain words, but then there's principles about using words. But, I feel like you would have every reason to sort of be more public about your disappointment because the facts are on your side and the public's on your side, you have elected officials on your side, but you haven't necessarily chosen to sort of go out, necessarily, and be really offensive on this one. Is that because that's just your style or is that because you're hopeful now that you can sort of bring it up again? Or is it because you're not going to be a commissioner and you're thinking of the governorship? How come you haven't been more aggressive about your disappointment and what happened?

Casey Kulla (00:28:12):

I think probably the easiest answer, Jonathan, is I just keep working on it. When you recognize that you don't have the votes to get this specific thing, then you work on every other part of it. You talk with staff and my own colleagues are opposed to something, and so I even want to be careful about what I talk

about. I've helped support Chehalem Parks and Rec in their own considerations about whether they could in fact purchase the trail. And that's it's own thing that's out there.

Jonathan Maus (00:28:50):

Could that be a viable thing?

Casey Kulla (00:28:52):

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, that's the reality of it is absolutely. They have a master plan for trails all across Yamhill County.

Jonathan Maus (00:29:01):

Okay. But the big question is, do they have a board and who's on it?

Casey Kulla (00:29:05):

They do. It's an elected board. Yeah. And they actually had two new members who... They elected at least one new member who is not a supporter of it. But what they're doing right now is they're developing a trail from the Fred Meyer in Newburg all the way down to the waterfront and then over to Dundee they're committed to trails, and that's different than a county. We didn't even know where to put the trail. It was like, is it a park? I don't know.

Jonathan Maus (00:29:38):

That struck me. I think that conversation would've been a lot different and perhaps a trail wouldn't have been stopped, and this is no offense to Yamhill County and the all work that folks can do, but it's not a trail planning organization like someone like Metro or something else. And I realize, and I sense a big part of the opposition was saying, we didn't hear about it in time. A classic thing people say, and other issues. People that plant trails like as a thing they do all the time, they're used to that, they're going to be way on the front end with like, I think sometimes too much outreach, but they're going to do all that kind of stuff. Yeah. So it's interesting. And I guess we'll have to see if the Chehalem Parks and Rec District can do that. Or geez, I think even if it does get real and that it is a real possibility if they would even choose to move forward on it, just given the huge storm that it could bring to their agency.

Jonathan Maus (00:30:25):

So, just to kind of put my own personal point on... Not personal, but just to put sort of a final point on the Yamhelas discussion, although I think to be talking about it more in the future. I think it's worth letting folks know that while technically your view lost that vote in February, I just woke up this morning and saw the news that Commissioner Berschauer just barely squeaked by a recall vote attempt by a few signatures. So she's definitely feeling some consequences from the people, from a lot of voters in that area. And in the meantime, you're skipping around the state and doing a bunch of interviews to run for governor. So, that's what I'm seeing as a trajectory after that vote.

Jonathan Maus (00:31:08):

So I want to move on of course, to the big thing. One thing I find fascinating is that as your interview all over the place from many different kind of outlets that have nothing to do with transportation, almost every single one of them you've brought up transportation as an issue. Yeah, you've brought up not only transportation, but real specific issues about the Oregon Department of Transportation ODOT. And I

think almost all of them you've actually brought up bicycling, which I think is really interesting of course. I think that may surprise a lot of people who end up talking to you or that talk to you in the media because they see you as this rural farmer person and you're not going to talk transportation.

Jonathan Maus (00:31:47):

Why is transportation such a big issue for you? I also noticed on your website, it has almost as many paragraphs as any other thing, and I did count, I do that. So you have almost as many paragraphs for transportation on your policy platform then the other big issues, like education and the environment, all that stuff. So why is transportation such a key thing for you?

Casey Kulla (00:32:07):

I mean, that's really awesome, I love it. That means that I'm not... I mean, I'm coming to everything with the I'm focusing on this person, their question. The top issues as I saw, and I hear it from people, if I'm filtering through what I'm hearing is climate change, the political extremism and just the chaos around that, and then housing and homelessness and the cost of housing. And if you think about it, somebody walking or somebody riding their bike, if we can make that happen, that is one of the best ways to address climate change and also to get people to be healthy and also to build communities. When you're out in a place slowly, you see things differently.

Jonathan Maus (00:32:51):

Yeah. And you also bring it up as another one of your main principles is this idea of bringing Oregonians together, and I know every politician says that. But, one of the few videos you have is called Bringing Oregonians Together and I was watching it and you say, let's come together around food and you make this amazing pitch with the B roll of farming and fresh food. Let's come together around the oceans and mountains. All standard stuff. And then all of a sudden people on bikes pop up and let's come together around transportation. So it sounds to me like, you're also seeing transportation as one of these fundamental things that can be not as partisan.

Casey Kulla (00:33:26):

Some east side counties, a large portion of their economic activity that's not solar rays is hunting, it's fishing, it's riding your bike, it's rafting. It's being out there in the woods, in the canyons. And so if you think about the things that we actually can agree on and can make money off of, because it's important for people to have a way to make a satisfying income. I mean, that's one of them, right?

Jonathan Maus (00:33:58):

Yeah, for sure. But I mean, it's not as kumbaya as oceans, I don't think. I think oceans, we can pretty much have some really great stuff get passed. And maybe if we're talking about should Oregon still allow people to drive on them we can get into some issues there, but I won't belabor you with that one right now. But, kind of on that note about Eastern Oregon, let's say, I mean, I don't think a lot of people listening to this will know, but on your website you say ODOT should pledge to, quote, not permit any new fossil fuel infrastructure, what should include, for now, freeway expansions. So when adding lanes to freeways and relieving bottlenecks is, I think you can look factually and statistically, it's currently the number one priority at ODOT. How do you make the case that they shouldn't expand anymore freeways, and we should call these fossil free infrastructure? How do you make that case in front of a group of tr truckers in Eastern Oregon who say they've got to relief bottlenecks in Portland to get their wheat to market?

Casey Kulla (00:34:58):

Yeah, absolutely. When I drive through the Portland area with the kids and we talk about the freeways, because we talk about things like the freeways, I always say that as a farmer I know that the best thing that we can have on a freeway is certainty. So even if that means I'm going to drive 35 the whole time through a section, that means when I type it into my GPS in Eastern Oregon, and it says seven hours, that by the time I get to Portland it'll still be seven hours, that it's not going to be 12 more hours because there's some wild congestion. So the certainty is something that most businesses thrive on and the same goes for getting product to market. If I leave at half an hour before I know I need to get there and then I come to something that is the bottleneck rather than being like, oh, well, I know next time it's going to take me 35 minutes. I've just missed my appointment. It's terrible. Or the boat.

Jonathan Maus (00:36:02):

And I use that example about-

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Casey Kulla (00:36:03):

It's terrible or the boat.

Jonathan Maus (00:36:03):

Yeah, and I use that example about Eastern Oregon wheat farmers not as a hypothetical, but that's literally one of the main influences on the legislature green lighting what's now a billion dollars for I5 at the Rose Quarter where literally farmers from Eastern Oregon with wheat in their trucks that are coming to the aid of the pro highway folks are saying, "We've just got to have more lanes." So that is actually a real thing.

Casey Kulla (00:36:23):

And it's not even just Eastern Oregon farmers. So Yamhil County grass seed growers haul straw, grass seed straw, to the port. So they're coming through town all the time.

Jonathan Maus (00:36:34):

So on that note of funding, you've also said that for you, funding must start with priorities rather than just simply getting more money into an agency. Let's put the priorities first. I think all agencies say that for the most part, they don't not necessarily live it. So ODOT, for example, is coming into a lot of new money with the Biden infrastructure package. What would be your advice to ODOT and the Oregon transportation commission, which oversees and sets policy for the state around transportation? What is your advice to them in setting those priorities?

Casey Kulla (00:37:11):

Listening, actually listening before you make the budget. And I say that because I know that they're not.

Jonathan Maus (00:37:19):

Well they'd say they do. They could point to a bunch of open houses and tons of staffers that have a bunch of social media accounts and they can say, "We've heard from Oregonians that the number one problem is congestion on the freeway." They've actually been saying that for years. So how do you

change that dynamic? Really, they only listen to certain people. The whole house bill 2017 and team package, which was in, at least in governor Kate Brown's tenure, the biggest thing that's happened for transportation money-wise. I remember the whole framework for that was set up with this thing called the governor's visioning transportation panel or something like that. And it was so discouraging.

Jonathan Maus (00:37:58):

It was just all the same suspects, a bunch of trucking interests and business interests and chambers of commerce going and staring at bridges and taking a picture and saying, "We must earthquake ready these bridges." They didn't really hear from people that suffer from getting around urban arterials. They didn't hear from people who can't get their kids on their bikes to school because they're too afraid of that intersection. So how do you get them to change their priorities, which I'm assuming you agree are not the right ones at the moment or the status quo is not great. So how do you get them to change their priorities?

Casey Kulla (00:38:32):

And I will say that it's not even that I disagree with their priorities. It's just that that's not what people in communities across Oregon are saying. That's the thing. And so I have this weird and unique position in that I'm a commissioner, so I work with everybody. I also get to beyond things like the mid Willamette area committee on transportation. And so they I see regularly ODOT officials presenting what they're going to fund. And it's rare that we are able to push back, but it's very satisfying when we do, I will say that. Because we're like, "You've come to us and you're not telling us what you're going to fund and we're going to check the box on. We are going to tell you what our communities want and need." And often, you said actually, you said something about the intersection, the kid in the intersection, often it's about fixing intersections that aren't safe. I think it's really interesting that that's what community leaders say.

Jonathan Maus (00:39:38):

Right, and again, I think the trick here is that ODOT says they hear that and they'll go mark that project down and they'll put it in their database of 1,000 other intersections and they'll run it through some scoring thing and they'll run it through another formula and see if there's funding and attach it to a grant. They do that. And at the end of that process, if it gets selected, it's going to have a tiny little bit amount of money probably with whatever solution that ODOT engineers who have their own biases. But then in the meantime, while they're going through that process with one intersection, they're going to Metro just like they did yesterday at a committee meeting and they're getting 71 million more dollars to keep planning a big huge mega project of the interstate bridge replacement. So again, it's this priority thing and I think the tough thing with pinning down ODOT is they can always answer your question in the affirmative and they can do it factually. They can say, "We are listening. Oh yeah, we have that project marked down somewhere," but it's like, which projects are getting the most money?

Casey Kulla (00:40:32):

When is it going to come? And when is it our attention? And yeah.

Jonathan Maus (00:40:34):

Right, so that's really the key. So maybe-

Casey Kulla (00:40:36):

I had never heard a demand for 10 more lanes in Grand Ron, I had never heard anybody say, "God, can we have 10 more lanes and three more bridges please?" And I discovered that their concern was where 22 comes into 18 at what we call valley junction, it's just east of the casino. And it's a dangerous intersection because people get impatient. We could do something about that. That didn't involve 10 lanes, 10 new lanes in rural Polk county.

Jonathan Maus (00:41:15):

Yeah, so you remember of the mid Willamette area commission on transportation, which I'm glad you mentioned, because ODOT has I think there's five or six of them. Are they region based? Yeah, okay. So ODOT has these area commissions on transportation, but the reality is right now, we have four people that sit on the Oregon transportation commission, supposed to be five. They have shown zero urgency of filling that fifth spot, even though youth activists with sunrise movement and other people have said name a youth representative, they haven't done that either. So there's-

Casey Kulla (00:41:46):

And in our community, we're trying to get a travel member on it too.

Jonathan Maus (00:41:49):

Yeah, so there's four people and they are, in my judgment, relatively conservative when it comes to transportation policy, they're also very supportive of ODOT, which I think is inherently problematic since they're supposed to be somewhat of a watchdog and hold ODOT accountable. They seem very chummy. I think they've spent a lot of time together getting beers and hanging out and I think it shows in the way they speak about ODOT and projects. Yeah, and that to me is a huge red flag. So you've mentioned-

Casey Kulla (00:42:17):

I'm so glad you're bringing up OTC.

Jonathan Maus (00:42:20):

Well I want to bring it up in regard to air commissions on transportation, because you've also said, I think it's even on the policy platform on your website that you think the ACTs, those area commissions on transportation, those should be elevated. So as governor, have you thought about the need to reform the OTC, what would you say about perhaps giving the acts or maybe a representative from each ACT or maybe it's one person who represents all the ACTs or something, some sort of voting power on the OTC?

Casey Kulla (00:42:48):

Yeah, I think that that's an interesting way to do it. I will say that every ACT member from across the state that I've heard from asks some version of, "What the hell are we doing here?" When we are getting these things there's a chair of all the ACTs and they're frustrated by it too. But one thing that a very smart person, who's very knowledgeable and experienced and who will chuckle if they ever hear me talking about their ideas on here and I will give them credit, but I'm not going to tell you who it is, said that the commissions really need to have a charge by the governor to be charged with enacting the policy of her administration in their area of expertise.

Casey Kulla (00:43:44):

So they are the OTC, LCDC, land conservation development commission, sorry, that they should be thinking, "What is the governor's priority in this part of life in Oregon and how can I take my own personal experiences and shape those into policy to direct ODOT, to direct DEQ?" And so that's what this person who I really appreciated their thoughts on it was recommending and I think that's a really good way to go forward and it way for the ACTs to really have a new charge as well.

Jonathan Maus (00:44:25):

Yeah, so having more of a direct line to the governor's office.

Casey Kulla (00:44:28):

Yeah, yeah.

Jonathan Maus (00:44:29):

Besides that, since I proposed that as an idea, is there any other thing that you think the governor can do to make the OTC different, more progressive when it comes to transportation? Have you thought about that?

Casey Kulla (00:44:42):

Yeah, I think it's obviously the OTC needs to have a full membership and that full membership really needs to one, represent the geographic and cultural and race diversity of Oregon, but it also needs to be challenged to put into practice the policies, the priorities of the governor. Just absolutely needs to be there doing that and almost as a surrogate of the governor. Telling ODOT exactly what they expect them to be doing and then saying, "Okay, are you following through on it?" It's that whole set expectations then hold accountable. And I want to say, Jonathan, I really feel like it's important to acknowledge that there are very good people at ODOT who are doing their mission and at the same time, it can be true that a cultural change is necessary.

Jonathan Maus (00:45:38):

And I've heard you mention that I think it was maybe just an offhand remark during an interview that you are hoping for some turnover ODOT as a way of hastening that culture change.

Casey Kulla (00:45:48):

Well that sounds [inaudible 00:45:54], but that's the only way you get culture to change really is for folks who are like, "I've had my time here." Realistically, if we look at just... Not to focus in exclusively on ODOT, but if we look at agency heads and deputy directors, it's really white, it should absolutely be more diverse.

Jonathan Maus (00:46:21):

Says the white guy who's running for governor.

Casey Kulla (00:46:23):

Absolutely, yeah, absolutely. Agency heads need to reflect the experiences and values of the place in all of its diversity.

Jonathan Maus (00:46:33):

Okay, so switching gears a bit, what do you think about I-5 Rose Quarter project and where do you see it going from here?

Casey Kulla (00:46:40):

What I think we'll see ultimately, if I have anything to do with it, and if I listen as closely as I can, I'm not in the business of tearing things apart, but what I do see is that if you can have certainty in the rose quarter for truckers, and so maybe that's the congestion pricing, a real certainty that you know you're going to drive 25 miles an hour, but you're going to get through it in 15 minutes and then you're on the rest of your way. Plus a cap that actually does connect the community. I think that's a win.

Jonathan Maus (00:47:11):

That's what you said is that the cap and the pricing, neither of those ODOT wanted to do initially, they're definitely coming around on the caps. They're still dragging their feet on the pricing. Yeah, and I guess if I do look forward, I think that's probably what they would have to do or else they'll just face continued opposition. And then so I guess hopefully if you spin that out, they do the caps, they do the pricing, and then they realize they don't need the extra lanes because the pricing took care of it.

Casey Kulla (00:47:38):

The one thing I must say that I am nervous about as I keep a close ear to rural communities and our urban fringe as I think about it, is I-205 is an important thoroughfare, it doesn't go through the middle of town, through the heart of Portland. And what I hear is an intention, a plan to just toll it. And I want to say that rural folks who are trying to get through the Portland Metro area, they're going to take 205 and I don't want people to be, no matter what their time of the day is, to have to pay a fee for a road when we could be doing something like congestion pricing. Because if it's literally just to make money, if the tolling is just to make money, I'm careful about my words, but I say that's disgusting if it's going to be on the backs of people.

Jonathan Maus (00:48:37):

Yeah, well you'll be dealing with that dynamic between a toll to just have a flat fee for people that I think ODOT in this stage of the game would just use for more big projects that they and their friends in the OTC can push through, or is it going to be actual dynamic pricing that's about behavior change and management. So I think given how slow ODOT is rolling on all of their pricing related stuff, which I think is purposeful, by the time if you were elected governor, you'd definitely be in the middle of those debates. I don't think we've talked necessarily enough about climate change as it relates to transportation. One of the big concerns I have right now, again, it comes from that ability for ODOT to be Teflon with any criticism.

Jonathan Maus (00:49:26):

So the way they answer the reason why they want wider freeways and more lanes and more capacity is they think, and this is a thing, they believe that idling and being stuck in traffic is bad for the environment so decreasing bottlenecks making traffic go faster and smoother to them is a climate change strategy. This isn't an activist talking here that's just trying to have some conspiracy. Literally the director of the agency, Chris Strickler, has said that. I heard their lead bridge engineer the other day said it in a meeting that they don't want people being stalled in traffic because it's bad for climate change. You're an ecologist, you have some science background. Do you agree with that? Is that a climate change strategy to make sure people can drive cars and trucks faster on the freeway without stopping?

Casey Kulla (00:50:15):

So I have degrees in science, so I say that I'm trained as a scientist. I try to have that nuance of saying, "I'm not a scientist because I'm not practicing." But what that means is that my default is I have my values and I hear the priorities of the community, but what does the data actually show? And that's what I, as an example, I heard the same exact thing with respect to finishing the bypass, the Newberg Dundee bypass. And it's exactly what people said was, "Oh, well we're going to eliminate..." I said, "What's the climate impact of this one way or the other?" And they said, "Well we're going to eliminate the idling of people in downtown and that's going to be good for climate." And I said, "Well is there really a benefit? Can we quantify that?"

Casey Kulla (00:51:06):

And it was thank God for Congresswoman Bonamici, because she was like, "If you're going to ask me for an earmark for the bypass, I need to know that it's helping communities of color and marginalized communities and it actually takes on climate." And so I said, "Anybody want to do that? Take it on." We actually need to have some real data here. Somebody said, "I'm going to pay for a study," but I think it's really important when we look at it to be like, "Does it actually do that?"

Jonathan Maus (00:51:39):

Are you skeptical of that claim?

Casey Kulla (00:51:40):

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, I'm skeptical until I see the evidence. And what I mean by that is because I saw some comments of yours on Twitter and what I started thinking about was yes, maybe free flowing traffic is technically less emissions and less particular emissions than idling. But if we're talking about a hundred million or a billion dollar project, let's look at the options for getting people out of their cars into different modes. Because we could say if we give everybody a bike and build a bike freeway, what will that do?

Jonathan Maus (00:52:19):

Right, there's that. But I think the other big thing that ODOT is missing, and I need to do more investigation to find out exactly where Director Strickler's claims come from. My strong hunch is that there's definitely research, there's actually a lot of federal research you can find that says idling is worse for the environment because of particulates. But they don't go to the next step, which is free flowing traffic equals more car trips equals more traffic. And that, if you think of the life cycle cost of the car, if you think of all the other negative externalities of those cars over time and ultimately, sorry folks, it's not the Jetson's, you're going to have bottlenecks if you invest in a system like that. You're never going to get free flowing. It's like a piece of-

Casey Kulla (00:53:03):

I was just going to say that, how long until we don't have free flowing again?

Jonathan Maus (00:53:05):

You can't, it's impossible. You cannot put that back in the bottle. So again, but it's good for them because they just say, "Well the research shows," but there's more nuance to it than that. It's also like job security for them because yeah, they're going to be whack-a-moling bottlenecks forever into

perpetuity, which is all they want because it's job security and it keeps them comfortable. So that's what's I think just a huge red flag is that we actually have the highest leadership of our transportation system in Oregon going on a completely wrong fallacy around climate as it relates to transportation. So I wonder what you think about a framing of the transportation issue in terms of its impacts on people. In Portland, we hear a lot about gun violence, actually all over Oregon, people are talking about Portland's gun violence. So we hear about it a lot of times, but there's also an epidemic of traffic violence here, traffic crash...

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Jonathan Maus (00:54:03):

... but there's also an epidemic of traffic violence here, traffic crashes, people being held hostage in their streets because they're afraid. The number of stories, I have this working theory that per capita to a person, especially in urban areas, transportation is a larger daily threat to people than guns and crime. I think you can make a real case for that. And we actually see here in Portland, we have a transportation commissioner who I think is starting to understand that and starting to make ... Well, let me say Commissioner Hardesty does understand that.

Casey Kulla (00:54:31):

I was going to say I think she does. Yeah.

Jonathan Maus (00:54:33):

She totally understands it. And what I meant to say, she's starting to do some things about it actually on the street, right? So a couple weeks ago, she put barrels out and barricades to try how to slow people down, since a lot of the gun violence is related to people in getaway cars speeding through the neighborhood, which I thought was a fascinating, in a lot of ways, a watershed event.

Casey Kulla (00:54:49):

Right.

Jonathan Maus (00:54:49):

Right? I don't think a lot of people [crosstalk 00:54:51].

Casey Kulla (00:54:50):

It was like, "Oh, I can use the transportation, I can use PBO-

Jonathan Maus (00:54:53):

Yeah.

Casey Kulla (00:54:53):

"... to respond to this thing that people talk about as a public safety thing," right?

Jonathan Maus (00:54:57):

Yeah. And so, but this has been something that's been growing, and I think Commissioner Hardesty was impacted by something that happened, I think it was back in either this January or the January before, of a man who took his car and just rampaged through our neighborhoods and hit a bunch of people. It was terrible. And I think that is the place when Commissioner Hardesty, at least for her part, really started to use and understand the term traffic violence and vehicular violence.

Jonathan Maus (00:55:25):

Because before that, activists and advocates and people like myself have been talking with that framing for a long time. And actually, specifically down in Salem, somebody from the Street Trust was testifying at one point and used that term. And the co-chair of the Joint Transportation Committee really bristled. She stopped the meeting and she was almost resentful that that person giving the testimony that used the word traffic violence. It was just really sensitive. It really brought up a lot of stuff for this powerful co-chair of the Transportation Committee.

Jonathan Maus (00:55:56):

So I'm curious from your perspective, do you think talking about the scourge and the amount of traffic violence in our communities, do you think that can be an effective political framing of the issue?

Casey Kulla (00:56:07):

I think it's so powerful to tell new stories about the world that we inhabit. And I think that talking about the dangers of being out in the world, in a world that is really car dominated and we've set up to be car dominated, we have to tell new stories. And that's a way of doing it, right? And we can connect it to political extremism, right? Because there's this thing with using cars to charge protestors. So it's all connected.

Jonathan Maus (00:56:40):

Yeah.

Casey Kulla (00:56:40):

I think that Commissioner Hardesty and Metro Council President Lynn Peterson together have increasingly what I see as a very effective combination of leaders, too. And I've never met Commissioner Hardesty, but I see her becoming more effective at responding to community and the challenges and the heartache through using the tools she has, right?

Jonathan Maus (00:57:09):

Yeah. I like that you brought up the importance of telling new stories. And I think to me, one of the coolest stories I've gotten a chance to cover over the years is these small towns in Oregon, lot of them rural mountain towns, that have seen the green in money that cycling can bring. I've just been fascinated. I've befriended a guy who owns a ranch outside of Heppner.

Casey Kulla (00:57:31):

Okay.

Jonathan Maus (00:57:31):

And you would love this, Casey. You've got to get out to this guy's ranch, because he started it as a hunt. It's called TREO Bike Ranch.

Casey Kulla (00:57:37):

Okay.

Jonathan Maus (00:57:38):

That's how I know it. But it's TREO Ranch everybody else.

Casey Kulla (00:57:40):

Right.

Jonathan Maus (00:57:40):

And as you move up in Oregon politics, you're going to end up going, because all the big time politicians apparently hunt at this guy's ranch [crosstalk 00:57:49] quail and pheasant, right? So-

Casey Kulla (00:57:49):

Got it.

Jonathan Maus (00:57:50):

He has this really successful ranch, a little outside of Heppner, where he was born and raised, family's from there. But then one day, he saw a bunch of cyclists coming by. I think, man, maybe Cycle Oregon or something. He saw this big pack of riders coming by and he realized, "All during the winter, we're snowed in. I'm not making any money."

Casey Kulla (00:58:05):

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus (00:58:05):

And this light bulb went off several years ago. And so he invested all this money into making a bike tourism, basically. Yeah. For a couple years, he was really this shining star. He beat all the Travel Oregon events. And everybody was like, "Let's traipse this guy in because he's the rural perfect illustration of [crosstalk 00:58:23] the bike economy and what bike tourism can do."

Casey Kulla (00:58:25):

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus (00:58:25):

Is that an issue you have any experience with? Do you see that as somebody who gets biking, who's biked yourself, who is concerned about transportation issues, but also comes from a rural area? Is that something you think is worthwhile? Sometimes, I feel like when we talk about it, it's just something bike people think is cool, but doesn't really have a lot of juice beyond that. Am I wrong there? What do you think?

Casey Kulla (00:58:45):

That's how some people framed the Yamhelas Westsider Trail. For me personally at the time, it was really about getting people from Yamhill to Carlton safely, right? It's connecting these places that are so close together.

Casey Kulla (00:59:01):

But remember that I grew up in Lincoln City, and that bike shop, it was open specifically on 101 to cater to the folks who were coming from north to south, right? That was the only reason that we really existed. And then we sold bikes to people in town, things other than Schwinns, right? It was the first place you could buy a really quality bike. And so from my very earliest teenage years, that was the world I lived in.

Jonathan Maus (00:59:29):

Yeah. It's one of the things I think is unfortunate and funny, sad about the people who say they're so opposed to Portland Creek, but then they just ignore or don't see or choose not to see the dozens and dozens and dozens of small towns around Oregon-

Casey Kulla (00:59:43):

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus (00:59:43):

... that are welcoming cycling.

Casey Kulla (00:59:45):

Oh my gosh.

Jonathan Maus (00:59:45):

And we're printing money and putting up people in hotels. I think the Town of Independence is the most recent one that I've been talking to some folks there. They've got a new hotel. It's a bike hotel. They're like, "Come down and stay here. Tell everybody what a bike place we are."

Jonathan Maus (00:59:59):

And I heard you mention recently Willamina [crosstalk 01:00:02].

Casey Kulla (01:00:01):

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus (01:00:02):

... logging town. Are they doing stuff as well? So you've actually-

Casey Kulla (01:00:04):

Right, right. Thanks for getting back to that. Like many small towns that are still alive, right, they have reinvented themselves over the years. They were a brick city. They literally didn't cut any timber except to fire the brick kiln. And they carved out this bend in the Willamina Creek, and all of McMinnville and a

lot of Portland were built with the brick from Willamina. And then when the mine played out in the '50s, then they started logging and they started logging really big trees on federal lands. Eventually, those are no longer big trees anymore. So they switch over to private land. They call themselves Timbertown USA.

Casey Kulla (01:00:43):

And then you think when you think of timber, you think of Willamina, but they've slowly realized that, as mills shut down, as consolidation happens, as trees get smaller, as more mechanization happens, right, so in the mill and in the woods, things are safer, and so that you don't need as many people out there, that they need different ways of living with the rest of the world. They can't just be their own isolated pocket.

Casey Kulla (01:01:11):

And so they're looking at ... We are the gateway essentially to the Coast Range and the Tillamoook State Forest and Siuslaw National Forest. All these gravel roads, you can get lost, right? Or you can get lost in in a good way. And they want to be part of that, right? So they set up the lot next to the City Hall as a bike camping area. And they're changing their transportation system plan so that there's paths all around town. They're doing a loop around town so that there's always a way to get everywhere. It'll be a little longer. They're building up pump track. They're going to have the first pump track in Yamhill County, in a town of 600 people. It's so cool.

Jonathan Maus (01:01:53):

Wow.

Casey Kulla (01:01:53):

And they're going to build ... They're probably going to get the first railroad, right-of-way rails to trails, in Yamhill County, even though there were 20 years of work on the [inaudible 01:02:04].

Jonathan Maus (01:02:03):

Yeah.

Casey Kulla (01:02:03):

I just love that.

Jonathan Maus (01:02:06):

I love it. I just think you're so onto something, that you're including bicycling directly and specifically in as one of these things that can bring Oregonians together.

Casey Kulla (01:02:16):

Oh yeah.

Jonathan Maus (01:02:16):

Because I just think not enough Oregonians, I think, appreciate how the thread of cycling is run through our state for so many years. You're sitting right in front of a bike map here from 1896. It's called the Cyclist Roadmap of Portland, right? So from that to the story I was telling you about the TREO Bike

Ranch, where he's got hunters in the winter and bikers in the summer coming in and he's doing a good business. I know a lot of hunters like bikes because they're silent and you can put a rack on them and take out [crosstalk 01:02:46].

Casey Kulla (01:02:46):

Oh, absolutely.

Jonathan Maus (01:02:46):

Take out [crosstalk 01:02:47].

Casey Kulla (01:02:46):

You're out in the woods and you will regularly ... They're on bikes.

Jonathan Maus (01:02:50):

Yeah. To these small towns doing tourism. And like you mentioned, gravel roads. Gravel road cycling is, who knows by this point, bigger than mountain biking almost.

Casey Kulla (01:02:59):

Oh yeah.

Jonathan Maus (01:03:00):

And not to mention the mountain biking town of Oak Ridge and a bunch of other places.

Casey Kulla (01:03:03):

Visit McMinnville. So Visit McMinnville is considered one of the best destination marketing organizations in Oregon. They're excellent at what they do. And one of the things they realized, "We can't build trails. We're a visitor organization. We're not a trail builder." But we have what ... What do we ... we have 350 miles of gravel roads in Yamhill County with an ADT of three or an average daily trip of three or four. And it's just a log truck here or a hay trailer there. And so they started building the map of, "Hey, come ride and your gravel bike here because it's amazing."

Jonathan Maus (01:03:37):

Well-

Casey Kulla (01:03:38):

I love it.

Jonathan Maus (01:03:39):

On that note, I hope you can retell me this story or this concept that you shared with me when we talked many months ago. You said something about ... And it definitely relates to cycling in rural areas. You'd said something about that people have a misperception about rural areas. And you said something about the myth of public space out in the country.

Casey Kulla (01:03:59):

Oh yeah.

Jonathan Maus (01:03:59):

Which I find really interesting, especially as we talk about building places for people to walk and bike in these areas. So can you flesh that out for me? What do you mean by that?

Casey Kulla (01:04:11):

Absolutely. Actually, so I spend a lot of time on water issues. So I put together this morning a presentation for the Home Builders Alliance, the Portland Home Builders Alliance about water issues, because I was like, "This is a housing issue that you probably know nothing about. And you don't need to know about it. I need your support for all these things." And then as I was thinking about it, I realized that there are many decisions that I've had the opportunity to make, the privilege of making in my role as commissioner. But if you ask the 11, almost 12 year-old in the household what the most important decision was that his Papa made, it was opening the gates on a gravel road so that people could access public land from the county, from the flatlands. It was two gates that were put up by Weyerhaeuser and on a county road with county permission, and then we essentially forced them to open them up. And we took on the maintenance of that road.

Casey Kulla (01:05:12):

And getting access to that public land for my son was the most important thing. And so we spend a lot of time out there just so that we can benefit from that thing. And the people we encounter, every single one of them is so happy to be out there. And so if you can bear with me, the thing is that in rural Oregon, there's a lot of private land. And usually, that private land is the thing between you on, say, a county road and that public land that you want to get to, because there's a lot of public land in Oregon, but it's inaccessible to the average ordinary Oregonian, including the Willamette River and other rivers.

Casey Kulla (01:05:53):

And so if you think about it, you might see 10 people in a day, compared to being in Portland where you might see 10, 000. But balancing that rural, I don't know, solitude is the fact that there isn't land that you don't have to pay to be on. And I feel strongly that one of the most important things that we have in this place that's so beautiful is we have this public land and we should be able to access it. And that's part of the working on the trail. That's part of getting these gates open, is so that we can be out in the landscape. I feel really strongly that having people on the landscape is one of the best ways to rebuild the connection between humans and the place that we have by our "modern living" have separated ourselves from.

Casey Kulla (01:06:49):

And that comes back to me and the ocean, is there's no separation. You're just a tiny, tiny part of a bigger landscape when you're on the ocean. You better learn how to be with it. And I think that it's important for all of us as a human, a species, to rebuild that connection.

Casey Kulla (01:07:05):

And I will say that if we think about it, the world of climate change, where we need to take action, we actually need to be repopulating or getting eyes back on places that we've maybe as a culture left to other people. And I say that ... I'm thinking about things like the timber industry has had fewer and

fewer people in the woods. And what that allows them to do is it allows them to treat it like a farm field, only it's a 45 to degree angle and a highly erodible soil. And they can put in a culvert, and then they don't worry about blocking the culvert, and the culvert blows out. Fish can't get through there. We've got silt in our rivers.

Casey Kulla (01:07:46):

We really need people on the landscape to help with the healing. And I know that for some people that are like, "Humans are bad for the landscape," and I really feel the opposite, is that we can't even know what we're missing until we're there.

Jonathan Maus (01:08:01):

Yeah. You talk a lot about going into communities and listening to people.

Casey Kulla (01:08:05):

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jonathan Maus (01:08:06):

And this summer, I was surprised to see you and your son on a bike in Portland.

Casey Kulla (01:08:12):

That's right.

Jonathan Maus (01:08:13):

Not that I'm surprised to see you on a bike, but just it was just on a group bike ride. I think it was during Pedal Palooza. So did you hear anything from Portland bike riders while you were here? Did you take anything away from that experience that you could share?

Casey Kulla (01:08:26):

Yeah. Well, it was my son and daughter who joined me, and they had never ridden in a city before.

Jonathan Maus (01:08:34):

Wow.

Casey Kulla (01:08:35):

You should see them on a drop, right? They can take the berms and just they can ride with the ... We aren't $6,000 mountain bike people, but with their farm bikes, they really can ride. But they've never been in a city, and they were very nervous about it. And so we parked on Clinton Street in the greenway and joined the ride over to the farmer's market. I think [inaudible 01:09:01] was producing or it was organizing.

Casey Kulla (01:09:03):

And the thing that I loved about it was that they were nervous, and then it was literally four, five people who were like, "Oh, I'll ride beside them," or, "I got this one," or, "Oh, here, we're coming to this. Oh, yeah. There you go." And they came up alongside them in the best metaphorical sense of it and being

like, "I'm here. I'm going to show you how to do this." And they just felt like it really was like a village enveloping them and being like, "We're going to mentor you now." And they loved it as a result, even though they went into the heart of downtown and back again.

Jonathan Maus (01:09:44):

The stories they can tell their friends.

Casey Kulla (01:09:45):

Oh my gosh. It was so great.

Jonathan Maus (01:09:46):

I love that.

Casey Kulla (01:09:47):

So I think it's really important to remember that, especially with the cycling community, that there's so many people who are looking to help each other, that I hope that when somebody is like, "Hey, can I ride my bike somewhere?," or, "I just can't afford to drive a car. Is it safe?," that they know somebody that they can reach out to or somebody will be like, "Hey, here's how you do it. Here's the place you go," because my kids got that opportunity.

Casey Kulla (01:10:13):

I will also say that the North Portland Taco Ride was also really fun.

Jonathan Maus (01:10:17):

Oh, you did that one?

Casey Kulla (01:10:17):

Although I bailed after six tacos, and there were still like five or six more to go.

Jonathan Maus (01:10:22):

How were the tacos as a food and vegetable person? Were they good?

Casey Kulla (01:10:25):

They were good.

Jonathan Maus (01:10:25):

Awesome.

Casey Kulla (01:10:26):

Yeah.

Jonathan Maus (01:10:27):

Casey Kulla, thanks so much for coming in. It was great to talk to you.

Casey Kulla (01:10:30):

It was so much fun talking to you, Jonathan. Thank you. Thanks for doing your work.

Jonathan Maus (01:10:35):

That was Yamhelas County Commissioner and gubernatorial candidate Casey Kulla. The Bike Portland Podcast is a production of Pedaltown Media Incorporated and is made possible by listeners just like you. If you're not a subscriber yet, please become one today at BikePortland.org/support. You can listen to more episodes and find out how to subscribe to our podcast at BikePortland.org/podcast. Our theme music is by Kevin Hartnell. I'm your host Jonathan Maus. And until next time, thanks for listening and I'll see you in the streets.

PART 4 OF 4 ENDS [01:11:12]