

Jonathan Maus ([00:01](#)):

... [inaudible 00:00:01] thanks for coming in and talking with me today, especially with the session about to start tomorrow.

Khanh Pham ([00:05](#)):

Thank you. I'm excited as well.

Jonathan Maus ([00:07](#)):

Good. And so, any thoughts as you embark on your second session, as a legislator?

Khanh Pham ([00:13](#)):

I am just approaching this short session with beginner's mind and a lot of excitement. I know five weeks is a relatively short amount of time, but we've got a solid plan. And my team is super excited about really advancing some really important priorities, this session.

Jonathan Maus ([00:30](#)):

Cool. I can't wait to talk about some of those. But before we get into that, there's a question I love to ask all my guests, which is, can you share something about your relationship to transportation, just how you've gotten around most your life?

Khanh Pham ([00:46](#)):

Sure. I mean, transportation has always been something I thought about a lot. I was actually born and raised in the suburbs. And as a daughter of immigrants and refugees who came from a lot of trauma, they were actually really worried about a lot of dangers. And so, it was really hard. It was a constant source of conflict because we just... I couldn't get to the places I needed to go. And so, I've always really just thought about how transportation is such a gateway for people to be able to access, whether it's schools or any jobs or opportunities, even the kind of community and social things that are necessary to be... to live a fulfilling life. So, that's always been really clear to me.

Khanh Pham ([01:28](#)):

And my first job out of college was actually as an organizer in training with the Labor Community Strategy Center in Los Angeles, which has the first, I think, the first Bus Rider's Union. And that was just a really formative experience, riding on the buses of South Central Los Angeles, South LA, just really mostly just organizing with black and brown bus riders, transit dependent bus riders in one of the most brawling cities in the country. And talking to them about the issues they face, the challenges getting to school or work.

Khanh Pham ([02:02](#)):

And so, I felt in love with bus organizing. I love the space of buses where one of the few spaces today, where we can actually come together, people of different ethnicities, people of different races, and sometimes class backgrounds, and actually talk to each other, forced to be in a shared space together. And I think that has always just really shaped how I see the world.

Khanh Pham ([02:27](#)):

Also, seeing the way that they took on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and sued them for civil rights violations, based on the ways that they were raising bus fares to fund some of their subway and light rail expansions. Also, gave me new into the ways in which even things that seem really positive can actually disproportionately hurt BIPOC and low income communities.

Jonathan Maus ([02:52](#)):

Interesting. So that makes a lot of sense, that when you came to the Portland area, you got involved with OPAL Environmental Justice Oregon, and APANO, and you carried some of that into your work. And it strikes me too, the way you described the space of a bus is sort of how I think a lot about public plazas. It's sort of a mobile version of a public plaza. So yeah, I love that. That's really interesting.

Jonathan Maus ([03:13](#)):

And I grew up too, most of my formative years, a few cities, I think, I guess, to the north of Irvine in Cyprus. So yes, come from also a really suburban environment, which has inspired a lot of the way I see transportation in Portland and activism in general. So, I can definitely relate to that.

Jonathan Maus ([03:29](#)):

So yeah, you were a... lot of people sort of think of you maybe as being new to the scene here, as a politician in Oregon. But you've really been, like you said, organizing around economic justice, social justice, transportation justice, these climate change issues for two decades now or so, going on. And I wonder as you are making this transition into being an elected official, what pieces of that activism sort of approach can you use to be a good politician? Then I'm going to ask which one do you think you have to kind of give up in order to be effective as a policy [crosstalk 00:04:03]. First off, what pieces of being an organizer, community organizer and activist, can you use to be an effective elected official?

Khanh Pham ([04:11](#)):

I mean, I feel like I use all the skills of organizing, as an elected official. I think I came into office knowing I wanted to be a different kind of legislator that was really bringing communities and coordinating with communities. I saw myself as still part of the movement, just maybe doing now the inside part of an inside, outside strategy. Where before, I was more on the outside and frankly, didn't have a lot of insiders to connect with. And so, I think the ability to build relationships with people, to be able to think about, "Who are your targets? Who's a real decision maker? Who do they listen to? Who do they... Who are they... What are they moved by? What are their values and how do I speak to those values so that we can meet them where they're at and also move them to where we want to go?"

Khanh Pham ([05:02](#)):

So I think those kinds of skills has been... and that power mapping, and all those skills have really been incredibly helpful for me as a legislator. And yeah, I think just a sense of humility as well, knowing that we are all just different roles and to make change. And I think it's really important that I recognize all the time, that I'm just, in many ways, a conduit to be able to communicate, what is the community saying? What are some of the needs that communities are saying? What are the solutions that we're coming up with? And if I can play my role more effectively, and maybe somebody else who taps... Maybe I tap out and somebody takes this place.

Khanh Pham ([05:43](#)):

But we're just really always trying to develop leaders. I guess that's the other thing, is really putting an eye towards... I'm always thinking about how do we develop new leaders and build more pipelines so that we have many other seats that are opening up in 2022, for example. And those are real opportunities. I never imagined myself in this position. Never. It was... It just personality wise, it didn't seem like the right thing. But now that I'm here, I see so many opportunities about what is possible when you have someone who is oriented towards community, does with the community organizing experience. And I do want to encourage our movements to be looking out for those opportunities so we can seize those moments, and really push for the transformative changes that we need in this moment.

Jonathan Maus ([06:29](#)):

Yeah. I hear you. You've said recently, that you feel like you're part of... when you were elected, you're a part of a progressive majority, a progressive majority in Oregon. And I've also heard you say you've been inspired by the squad, the likes of House of U.S. Representatives, Ilhan Omar and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. But as I'm sure you know, Capital in DC is a lot different than the capital down in Salem. So I just wonder how you would adjust that style, because I'm real... And were just talking about sort of how you balance sort of being an activist and being an elected official. And I'm really interested in those differences and how to be effective in both.

Jonathan Maus ([07:07](#)):

And oftentimes, activism can be a lot sort of more like strident views and maybe less likely to compromise because you have to appeal to a base of your donors and that sort of stuff. And it can be some similarities in politics, but I think there's also some interesting differences. So I wonder, how do you see sort of like taking on a strong, progressive voice in a state like Oregon, where we have a super diverse sort of urban rule thing going on? And I'm sure you've already found even with one session under your belt, you have to sort of make compromise. So, how do you do that, that sort of squad stuff, but in an organ context?

Khanh Pham ([07:42](#)):

Yeah, I think that's a fascinating question that I'm still constantly learning and refining. And I think one of the things that I've learned, is that it's not so simplistic as radical versus more moderate. Because I think a lot of voices feel like they have been unheard. For example, rural voices, I think, feel like they are not heard as well. And when I was the director at the Oregon Just Transition Alliance, we saw that when we went on our statewide listening tour for an Oregon Green New Deal, we heard some of the same challenges in rural communities as some of our low income and BIPOC communities and urban areas, in terms of accessing transportation or just accessing the benefits of the green economy.

Khanh Pham ([08:29](#)):

And often, the corporations want to pit us against each other and say, "Oh, it's those urban folks that don't understand your issues." And so for me, it's been also about try to... how to like break an out of the false binaries and choices around that certain more powerful money [inaudible 00:08:46] interest and want to keep us divided. And so, I guess I would say, it's been about making sure... I guess I'm trying to find the shared... what are the shared values. And I don't feel like I've actually tried to... I don't think I have had to compromise my vision. I think it's, what's important is to make sure that I reach out to constituencies that I wasn't able to work with when I was just working in Portland.

Khanh Pham ([09:09](#)):

And being able to find with rural legislators, where can we find the commonalities, where we both can maybe feel like we don't have our communities. Which includes some of the one and three Oregonians who don't have access to a car and don't have access to public transit. How do we find and push for our shared values to make sure we have a transportation system that works for all Oregonians?

Jonathan Maus ([09:35](#)):

So, it sounds like you're, in general, you have some hope and optimism that this sort of traditionally very divisive legislature in Salem, that you can't work past that. I mean, I'm just, I'm curious, anybody working down there, how much that weighs on your mind that we've had walkouts. And we've had such stride and partisanship as you come in there with this, I think, is a really productive vision of appealing to a lot of people. Is that weigh on your mind that there are so many people in those chambers that are you just willing to walk out if they don't agree with you? And how can you make progress in that environment?

Khanh Pham ([10:08](#)):

I wouldn't be in this job if I didn't have hope and just a sense of optimism, because as an organizer, I've had to talk with people. I mean, even in my own community, in the Vietnamese community, there's very many, very conservative people. And I just feel like I have a lot of experience in just trying to learn about people's lives and genuinely come with that sense of curiosity to understand their experiences. I can't say... I think it's important to hold both truths, right? Yeah, there's some really challenging hyper-partisanship and history there that I wasn't even a part of. And I think we have to be clear eyed about the real challenges that our democracy is facing both, not just in our state, but also just nationally that's impacting conditions here. But I also know that our state has a long history of being able to do when the country is in a deadlock. And so, I am still really hopeful and optimistic about what we can achieve.

Jonathan Maus ([11:02](#)):

Yeah, and I wanted to switch gears here a little bit to something a little more, well literally, more close to home. So, you live two blocks... I've heard you say you live a couple blocks from 82nd Avenue, which is, for folks who don't know, is a really dangerous sort of classic orphan highway the state has been in control of it all this time. It used to be the interstate and then they built a big... Or it used to be a highway and they built the big interstate next to it and neglected it for many decades. And it has a terrible safety record and all these things.

Jonathan Maus ([11:29](#)):

So I wonder, was it surreal for you to go from living there, organizing on those streets, talking to people's experience, trying to get the attention of lawmakers to within what seemed like a short time, in some ways, sort of being on the sidelines and on the teams and negotiating this \$185 million package that included the city in ODOT and the state legislature? What was that experience like for you?

Khanh Pham ([11:56](#)):

I definitely was humbled by the opportunity. I will say, there was no table or actual room, so [crosstalk 00:12:03]

Jonathan Maus ([12:02](#)):

Yeah, right. Okay.

Khanh Pham ([12:03](#)):

... it's not like there was a... I imagine that's how things happen.

Jonathan Maus ([12:06](#)):

It wasn't like a standard process that you probably would be more used to. It just seemed to be like, it was this amazing urgency that it came up to hasten this... what happened with folks was like a jurisdictional transfer. So eventually, Rep Pham was a part of a process to help get that over the finish line, something advocates been working for. So it just recently happened where the state said, "Okay, City of Portland, we'll get you this. We'll give you the money to sort of make this transfer happen." So yeah, sorry. You were saying, what was it like being there?

Khanh Pham ([12:32](#)):

Well, I think it's important to remember the ODOT first offered 3 million. Yeah, in this... That was their first offer for what they could contribute to jurisdictional transfer.

Jonathan Maus ([12:42](#)):

Wow.

Khanh Pham ([12:43](#)):

And it was only because... So actually would say, I've stayed kind of in my role. I don't think I was in the inside, but I... I worked with community groups. I mean, community groups that we just... we were still mourning the two pedestrian deaths within the space of two weeks of each other. And we knew that was not enough. And so, it was really community pushing and...

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Khanh Pham ([13:03](#)):

We knew that was not enough. And so it was really community pushing and making sure that it was clear. That that is not sufficient to the deadly conditions that our children, our students, our families are facing and our businesses too. And so we push and push and we're able to get 185 million within the space of a couple of weeks. So I have to say I was more just pushing a really, to testify at OTC and meeting with community and lifting it up through virtual rallies and things. But yeah, I think it just really shows that community engagement is key. We need to be leaning in and making sure that our governments are meeting the moment. And that's really how it happened. I actually felt like it just reaffirmed how important it is to have people with lived experiences and deep ties to community to be in the legislature.

Jonathan Maus ([13:53](#)):

Yeah. And I can appreciate that you haven't necessarily spent all the time on 82nd, given the other things on your plate. But if you close your eyes and envision a future for the street, can you see a future where those lanes people can currently drive on or reallocated to a bus, or could you see potentially like a bike lane on 82nd in the future? What does that look like to you?

Khanh Pham ([14:16](#)):

Absolutely. I can see. I mean, it really depends on what the community wants to see, but I would love to see a dedicated bus lane and more opportunities, not just for a bike lane, but really a separate [inaudible 00:14:33] bike lane that feels safe to bike on and really spacious sidewalks. Places where people can actually pause. A lot of the businesses there are seen as just places to just whizz by at 35, 40 miles an hour. But there are some really vibrant, small family-owned businesses along that quarter who would love people to actually walk by, stop in and really support local businesses.

Khanh Pham ([14:58](#)):

So, I guess I envision a place where people are not just speeding by because we have the 205 Freeway right next door. People, if they need to speed, they can go on that freeway. 82nd avenue can be a place where people connect, where they meet, where they shop, where they... It's already a place where people take their kids to school. So how can we make it a safe place where people feel safe. Where parents like meet like me... My daughter actually goes to school at Bridger, which is just on 79th Lane, right close to 82nd. And we have to cross 82nd to get there, and I would never in a million years let her.

Khanh Pham ([15:32](#)):

I used to walk to school. I would never know a million years let her cross that street by herself. Not until she's much, much older. And maybe, I don't know when I would feel safe because the cars there are just going way too fast. I've seen countless accidents and now have learned to brace ourselves for news of the next fatality or injury on 82nd. So yeah, my vision is a slower, more vibrant street where the businesses are supported. Where parents and families are supported and people can bike and walk and take the bus and drive if necessary. But it's just one of the many modes of transportation rather than the single mode that takes over everything.

Jonathan Maus ([16:16](#)):

And I wonder if you've thought or have any concerns around maybe like that tension, because it ultimately comes down to the fact that the vast majority of people on 82nd now drive a car on it. And so, no matter how people want to talk about this process or no matter how much optimism you might have given folks like you, like how you just described and other people. And I think basically the City of Portland's values and vision for it, the conversation's going to come to a point of, it's not going to be as easy or it's not going to be as quick or efficient to drive on 82nd.

Jonathan Maus ([16:48](#)):

Do you have any thoughts about what to do when people really get concerned about that? I hope that it doesn't turn into a flashpoint, but I've been around these projects and I know that I can see that happen. And I think I can see people bringing up, "Well, sorry, but these other options aren't available to my family yet. And this car is the only way I can get around, and if you take away 82nd avenue, XYZ can happen." So any thoughts about how you would respond to like a constituent that calls you and says, "Hey Khanh, what's going to happen here? They're taking away my street." How would you respond to someone like that?

Khanh Pham ([17:24](#)):

Well, I think it's the responsibility of the state, of our government to be able to make sure that this transition that we're going to make, which is challenging, but we have to make it if we want to survive that it's done in an equitable way. So, like the Portland Clean Energy Fund is a model for me of the approach that we need to take. Because we can take with a small 1% surcharge on billion dollar

corporations, we can build this Portland Clean Energy Fund, which generates over \$60 million a year and use that to fund. Can we buy electric bikes for every low income household in Portland? Can we buy a little covered electrical vehicle? Can we buy... What can we do? I mean, there's so much creativity. I mean, even as I was talking with some parents about... Because right now we're facing a school bus driver shortage, and what are ways that we can do kind of bike mobiles, where people, parents can help volunteer?

Khanh Pham ([18:20](#)):

And I think the key thing is that we need to be using our resources in a way that actually supports families and recognizes that currently we don't have options, so we need to be able to create those options and make it easier for people. Because if the transition is punishing the people who don't have the money or the access to resources to be able to bike or take other transportation, then that's an unjust transition and we need to make sure... I read somewhere. That's a slogan I keep going back to that transition is inevitable. We are seeing already with all the climate disasters we're facing. All the pandemics. And I mean, we are in the midst of a tremendous transition right now and the question is whether the transition is going to be just or not. And as government, we need to make sure that we're using all of our resources and organizing those resources to ensure it's a just transition.

Jonathan Maus ([19:12](#)):

Yeah. I'm glad you brought up the Portland Clean Energy Fund. And for folks who don't know it passed in 2018, local measure to raise, but you can correct me. \$50 or \$60 million a year for grants and other things that the community could then invest for clean energy related projects and climate change resiliency, all sorts of great things. Folks can look it up. But I think from my perspective, what was important about that was that the coalition of people around it and organizations look different than other major political efforts in Portland, the people of color, everybody. All different types of coalitions. It didn't usually come together, especially around clean energy. Let's say we're able to have this united front. And I noted that when it passed, one of the quotes that you said that really stuck with me was you said, "Oregon has a long history of white supremacy and you can see it even in our environmental movement where middle and upper class homeowners tend to dominate and they benefit most from programs like this."

Jonathan Maus ([20:05](#)):

So, I wonder if you see the same situation in the transportation movement, because of course, seeing the clean energy fund happen and me being someone who's really transportation focused, I'm like, "Okay, is that going to be a blueprint for something on the transportation side?" So, I wonder if you see those same starting blocks that clean energy fund had in terms of the history of that movement building. Do you see that being a problem in the transportation movement and then possibly as a blueprint to get over that?

Khanh Pham ([20:32](#)):

Yes to both answers. I absolutely see some of the same dynamics in the transportation justice or transportation equity circles. Sometimes I'm like, "Wow, it's only white men in this room." But I also see so much opportunity and there are groups. Like there they are leaning in and the Oregon Just Transition Alliance is also looking and about what the landscape look like statewide and people have raised some of their the concerns around the Highway Trust Fund or how do we make sure that we have intercity trans public transit and making sure that rural Oregonians have access? So, I absolutely see an

opportunity. So we took the Portland Clean Energy Fund model and then used some of those same principles of frontline leadership allied with more privileged capacity organizations who are working in alliance, but really clearly led by the frontline values.

Khanh Pham ([21:25](#)):

We took that model and helped build the Oregon Clean Energy Opportunity Campaign, which in 2021 won three bills for energy affordability, healthy homes, and 100% clean energy for all. And so, these are huge leaps and we did it centering frontline communities. And so, I think they're looking for their next issue. And I think transportation is one of the really important issues that have been lifted. So I'm hopeful that we can continue to use that same model, which is a winning model. I mean, it's been, I think it's a really powerful coalition, and I think I absolutely hope to see it also being used to win real transportation justice demands.

Jonathan Maus ([22:08](#)):

Great. And I remember you were saying something, something I read about the clean energy fund work and saying that, one... And also, the energy bills that you passed last session, that one of the ways you approached it that you thought made them more effective was that you avoided jargon specifically what we were talking about before about maybe appealing to folks down in Salem that wouldn't typically be your allies or maybe even see you and your allies as threats to them.

Jonathan Maus ([22:33](#)):

So you avoided, well, I won't say it's jargon, but you avoided terms like climate change and you said you focused on disaster resilience, right? To make it a more broad tent. Have you ever thought of transportation related terms or like you're saying, you use the same stuff. Like maybe let's say on 82nd, if that comes up and you're in those conversations and if people are talking of about, I don't know, closing a lane for cars or a road diet. Maybe there's a different way to say it. You're saying that's a good approach, huh?

Khanh Pham ([23:04](#)):

Yeah. I don't think that everybody is moved by the climate frame, but a lot of people in outside of the Portland metro region know what it's like to live next to an orphan highway. That sometimes that's the only main street in town is a highway that [inaudible 00:23:18] just hasn't historically been able to manage or to design in a way that could meet the community's needs.

Khanh Pham ([23:25](#)):

And so, I think that everyone can relate to what it feels like as a mother to have to walk your kid across the street where literally two people have died in the last month. Or if you are in a community that doesn't have access to public transit, or maybe they go once a day or something, that's a really paralyzing feeling to not be able to get to where you need to go. If your car breaks down and you have can't afford to repair it. And there's a million reasons why people can't drive and we need to invest in the transportation system that still gives people opportunities to get to where they need to go.

Jonathan Maus ([24:01](#)):

Yes. I totally agree with that for sure. So, I want to switch gears a little bit to the short session. I saw some of your legislative priorities. I didn't see any transportation related stuff in there, but you were

recently appointed to the Joint Transportation Committee. And I'm just curious, how did that come about? Is that something you lobbied the [inaudible 00:24:24] leaders for, or how did that come out to get a seat on that committee?

Khanh Pham ([24:28](#)):

Yeah, I definitely lobbied and asked for a seat on that committee. And I think that they saw a real value to having someone with my perspective and experiences as a mother who also has a child who goes to school off an orphan highway. Someone who is connected as an organizer to many of the communities who are most impacted and haven't necessarily seen a voice as much in some of the transportation decisions. So I was really heartened to see that they valued my perspective and wanted to see it on the committee.

Jonathan Maus ([25:00](#)):

Do you think there are any transportation issues that advocates should be looking in the short session to keep an eye on?

Khanh Pham ([25:09](#)):

Yeah, I think there are actually. I'm waiting to be briefed soon, but the agenda for the first meeting is up. And I think there might be something around Lyft, and my transportation policy fellow who just came on has been doing a little research and raised some flags about it, but I don't actually know what he has to say. So, I just encourage people to look at the agenda that's posted on our Oli's website. Just look up [oli.org](#), [legislature.gov](#), and check out the Joint Committee on Transportation because they are regularly posting agendas. And I think I would love to see what community's perspectives are in some of the bills that will be getting a public hearing.

Jonathan Maus ([25:49](#)):

So yeah, that's definitely one worth flagging. Another one that I don't know if the bill has come out yet. But the City of Portland has tried for several years to make progress on their automated street camera enforcement systems. So, traffic signal cameras, red light...

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Jonathan Maus ([26:03](#)):

... street camera enforcement systems. So, traffic signal cameras, red light cameras, stuff like that. They're going to try again, it's in their legislative agenda. Essentially what the bill does is right now there's a bottleneck because a sworn police officer has to look at every photograph and make the decision about the citation. So as you probably know, there's a movement to remove police from place where you don't necessarily need a police officer to be, especially when there's a bottleneck on something that a lot of people agree and think is effective like automated traffic cameras. So I wonder if that bill comes to your desk or comes to the committee, would you support that bill that would essentially remove that police officer and make it a civilian position within the Department of Transportation instead?

Khanh Pham ([26:41](#)):

I definitely support making sure that we're not trying to ask police to do things that they're not trained or not... Or I guess that is not really the primary focus that we are asking from police, whether it's mental health, dealing with mental health crises or helping unhoused people find shelter and checking red light tickets does not seem to be high priority that we should be asking the police to do. So my first inclination would be supportive of it, but again, I always look to community organizations and members who might have direct experience to educate me about the impacts of this proposed policy.

Jonathan Maus ([27:22](#)):

And one potential thing that I hope becomes a legislative issue soon here is something you've mentioned before and have mentioned in other contexts, which is changing how the formula funding comes down through the federal government. So like the bulk of ODOT's funding comes from what's called the Highway Trust Fund, which folks don't know, it's statutorily obligated to go toward the highway right of way. You can basically hear that as being it must be spent on freeways and other sort of driving centrics or status quo projects.

Jonathan Maus ([27:49](#)):

But you, Rep Pham, have made a point of saying that it might be time to open up that Highway Trust Fund law and maybe consider you being able to use that money, which is essentially gas tax revenue, for other things. And I'm just curious, when does that campaign start and where can people sign up? What's the latest on that? And can you explain your position on that, why you think it's important?

Khanh Pham ([28:12](#)):

Well, I feel like my role as a legislator is to make sure that our agencies and our policies, and in this case, even our constitution are really able to meet the current crises and the realities of 2022. And so if that means that we need to refer to the ballot, an initiative to let voters decide, this was a constitutional amendment that was developed, I think, in the '30s or '40s, I mean, decades ago before we understood the impacts of greenhouse gas emission and how devastating it would be on the whole state, whether it's wildfires or ice storms or the deadly heat waves. And we I think understand now that we need to take action on climate at an urgent pace. And we need to look at all of our institutions to make sure that we're pivoting, to make sure that we are getting rid of any kind of restrictions that are really inhibiting our ability to respond to the urgent needs to meet this moment.

Jonathan Maus ([29:14](#)):

It's a big topic among a lot of activists and advocates right now in the transportation space, which is thinking more broadly about reforming ODOT, reforming ODOT's bosses, the Oregon Transportation Commission, or maybe having the governor's office or legislators take a more active role in changing, and really intentionally changing how some of these status quo policies have been going on. So back in September when I talked to you at the youth versus ODOT rally, I think in your speech you said, "ODOT has to play a critical role in this transition," which you were talking about, what you were just describing, which is a new approach to transportation that isn't so focused on driving.

Jonathan Maus ([29:51](#)):

And I think if I'm an ODOT person, I could list off a long list of things that we're doing great to show that we're changing. Climate Office and funding more for non-high projects than ever and safe routes to school program, all these things they can list, right? But it seems like they have more urgency and more funding for the bad things than the urgency and funding they have for the good things. So I'm just

curious from your mind, from where you sit now, do you think ODOT is headed in the right direction generally, or where do you see ODOT on that spectrum of really becoming the kind of agency you think we need in Oregon?

Khanh Pham ([30:29](#)):

Well, I think we have to recognize that ODOT started out as the department of highways, and that was their mandate. And in many ways, their structure really reflects their original mandate. And so what is hard for them even in is to shift their entire mission. They can do things along the sides, and I think they have really made real changes to start a climate office and do all these things on the side, but their fundamental mission, which is to maintain and build the freeway system still remains at the core of their mission. And so I think, I don't think it's their sole responsibility, I think it's also the responsibility of the governor and of us as state legislators to make sure that we are doing our job to make sure that they can see their mission differently, they can transform some of their strategies, because it's... My dad actually used to work for the California Department of Transportation and I just had an insight from afar about how hard it is to shift these huge bureaucracies.

Khanh Pham ([31:29](#)):

And so it really does have to come from the elected officials who are accountable to the people to make sure that we are carrying out that our agencies are actually carrying out the needs of communities and ODOT's no longer about just moving vehicles from point A to point B as quickly as possible. It's really about meeting all these other needs that were never envisioned when they first formed. And unfortunately, even as I do think they are making changes, I think all of our systems, not just our transportation system, our housing system, our energy system, all of it, we're just not equipped. It's from the 20th century or even the 19th century. And we're having to really transform all of these systems because the changes are coming so fast. I think everybody's feeling like this. What is going to come in 2022?

Khanh Pham ([32:14](#)):

We are just prepared for just so many crises and transformation that are just showing us that the old ways of doing things aren't working anymore. And so we have together have to build new ways of working together that will really work for our communities or else we're going to just keep suffering in our rigid structures. So that's, I feel like, our responsibility.

Jonathan Maus ([32:36](#)):

Yeah. And I think a strong majority of Oregonians would agree with most of what you said, especially even if you got it specific to ODOT and the job that they're doing, but eventually something has to be done. And ODOT will often use that excuse too. Like if they're pressed on, "Hey, you need to do more, you need to do more," they'll say, "Hey, we're just doing what the legislators told us to do. Why don't you go talk to them?" So here we are talking to one of them. I'm just curious, I mean, at some point legislators and the governor's office and the OTC, right? There's that sort of triumvirate there. At some point, do you think that there needs to be like a heavier-handed approach to really intentionally make these reforms?

Jonathan Maus ([33:14](#)):

Because the way it's going now is the OTC rubber stamps everything ODOT does. They're not independent at all like they should be. They're all good buddies, they're all on the same team. And I

haven't seen a lot of engagement from the governor's office. She recently had an engagement on one specific project, but overall, she hasn't shown any willingness to appoint different OTC members or add new members. Like the youth activists have asked for a youth commission member and they actually haven't done that yet. So I wonder if you think... Governor Kate brown is on the way out and one of your allies, I think you would say, a friend, a former house speaker, Tina Kotek is one of the front runners to be governor. So let's say she won, would you be someone who really take that on or think that it's worth to spend political capital to be more intentional?

Jonathan Maus ([34:05](#)):

Get on the OTC agenda and say, "Hey, this is what we're hearing from the community. It's time to do business differently. This is how we're going to restructure this." I mean, do you think that's something that advocates are smart to be asking for? And is that how you see something that's needed in the next step in this reform journey that we're on?

Khanh Pham ([34:22](#)):

I absolutely think it would be a smart thing for advocates to really lean into and I am leaning into it regardless, but to collaborate together. I do think that a five-member appointed unelected board that's all volunteers it may not be fully equipped. I think we do need more voices on the commission to ensure that we're really fully thinking about all the different needs and all the impacts on communities as they're currently making decisions about how to spend billions of dollars in transportation funding. And we just need more voices, more accountability, and I definitely absolutely am having conversations with my fellow colleagues in the legislature about how we can lean into the current transportation systems to make them more effective.

Jonathan Maus ([35:11](#)):

And one big issue where the OTC is in lockstep with ODOT is in their really strong support of the I-5 Rose Quarter Project. When I asked you about it in September, you said you hadn't delved too deeply into it, but I just wonder, has that changed? Have you taken a closer look at it? And do you have any thoughts to share about that project in terms of your position on it, where it stands now?

Khanh Pham ([35:31](#)):

Yeah, I mean, I still wouldn't say I'm an expert, but I think some of the same questions that I'm applying to the Interstate Bridge Replacement Project are about what are the real needs? What's the purpose of any kind of project that we do? What is the problem that we're trying to solve and how can we ensure that we're right-sizing whatever project that it doesn't become overbuilt and then come at a huge opportunity cost to other transportation needs in our state like the orphan highways and the jurisdictional transfer. 82nd Avenue is just one of countless orphan highways. There's another one Powell Boulevard which also just recently suffered to pedestrian fatalities. I mean, this is just a tragic and ongoing story in our state and I'm concerned if these projects take really scarce money away from being able to invest in public transit or orphan highways or local needs that can conserve and really have concrete benefits for the one in three Oregonian who don't have access right now.

Jonathan Maus ([36:39](#)):

Do you think it's time to take a stronger stance on projects that involve expanding freeways?

Khanh Pham ([36:45](#)):

Absolutely. And then I forgot to mention, of course, expanding the lanes is as transportation engineers have shown over decades, it will just induce demand. And it hasn't been shown to reduce congestion because as people find, it's faster and easier to go, it just generates more demand. And I think in 2022 in this climate moment, we cannot be building expanding fossil fuel infrastructure.

Jonathan Maus ([37:13](#)):

That's interesting you said that, because I know you have a lot of experience with energy-related activism. I've heard you say things about like Zenith oil terminal in Portland and not expanding fossil fuel infrastructure, but I don't think I've heard an elected official do the jump and say that we should also include freeways in that fossil fuel infrastructure definition. And the definition matters, right? Because that's how it's adopted. At least locally here in Portland, is that we won't support fossil fuel infrastructure but it's meant to be oil trains and processing centers and things like that. But I mean, do you think it's time to call freeways fossil fuel infrastructure and get a little more strong with the language as a leader so that we can really put ODOT on notice that that's not going to happen anymore?

Khanh Pham ([37:56](#)):

Yeah. I see it as part of we're going to, if we make these investments, these are 100-year investments and we don't want to be locking in this old 18th... I mean, really, it's really 19th century infrastructure, at a time when we need to be radically rethinking our streets. Because we need to also build more resilience as a community, and we're going to be doing that, not by... We have to be thinking about what's going to make us most resilient and pouring in billions of dollars leaving us in debt so that we can't afford other... have the flexibility and nimbleness to be able to invest in other few places is not going to help us address the coming shocks and crises that we know are coming.

Jonathan Maus ([38:42](#)):

Yeah. And you're going to have a lot of time to talk about this because there's the I-5 Bridge Replacement project which they call it just at the north of the Rose Quarter. That's certainly going to be at the Joint Transportation Committee I'm sure eventually. So, I mean, just one last thing on that, I know you're going to have to take a more statewide view of these things probably than a lot of your constituents in your district want you to take. So-

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Jonathan Maus ([39:03](#)):

... constituents in your district want you to take. So one of the powerful arguments around expanding these freeways comes from, let's say Eastern Oregon wheat farmers that come down to Salem and say, hey, we really need wider freeways in Portland, because we've got to get our wheat to the market, to the ports and stuff like that. So what would you say to an Eastern Oregon wheat farmer that's saying, hey, I can't have any backups there. I got to get my wheat on that freeway. And I heard that you were saying bad things about freeway, so what's going on, Rep Pham? Why don't you support this freeway? What would you tell them?

Khanh Pham ([39:37](#)):

Well, I would actually talk about how I am precisely thinking about our needs statewide, and which is why I'm raising questions. I would absolutely support us taking action on the bridge replacement if there are specific needs around seismic safety. And I would like to see the data on the impact of traffic

congestion on the actual export prices, which I've yet to see. And I've actually seen more conflicting data about the minimal impact that congestion has on the actual price of any good at the end of its journey. I am really concerned about in Eastern Oregon, if they have real needs to, for example, for their communities to have in intercity transit between communities that need to access healthcare and often have to go to the next town over or the next county even to access particular kinds of healthcare, or schools, or jobs.

Khanh Pham ([40:38](#)):

Those counties also need transportation investments. And when we take our scarce dollars and pour it all into a \$5 billion project, that puts this one interstate bridge project at the top of the line to pay back the bond holders, and means that any other transportation needs that we may have basically don't get funded and won't get funded until we pay off the \$5 billion, which we don't yet have a full plan for how we're going to pay for it. So I guess, I'm actually very much taking a statewide look when I evaluate these projects and wanting to make sure that area regions are equitably invest in, and that we're not pouring it all into this one project, which arguably is going to primarily ... Or one of the main beneficiaries is going to be commuters who live on the Washington side, who want to commute to Portland.

Jonathan Maus ([41:39](#)):

Yeah, for sure. That's been one of my real concerns with that, is that there's so much focus on bridge project quote unquote, and it's really a five mile project area that includes lots of wider freeways, new interchanges that are going to go through communities that have already been hurt by the freeway. So that's something that I think may become a bigger issue too down the line as sort of like how they're framing and wanting to talk about the project versus what the project really is.

Khanh Pham ([42:04](#)):

Well actually, I'll just add to that too, because I did look at, or I'm still perusing ODOT's Bridge Inventory Project. But we have 700 something bridges across the state, and many of them actually do need some seismic retrofits. And with the recent collapse of the Pittsburgh bridge, I think it's really putting a spotlight on the poor condition of some of our bridges. And again, it's opportunity costs, like what are we going to spend our dollars on? And I remember reading, I can actually quote, in their Seismic Plus Program cost summary, it looks like we could actually retrofit 718 bridges across the state using the total seismic plus standard. It would cost \$5 billion as well. So it's almost the exact same price as a Bridge Replacement Project. And I think when we approach disaster resilience, we really need to use a systems approach, not just fortifying a single stretch of freeway. And also, we need to both fortify the single stretch, which is super important, and we need to be looking and taking a systems approach at the same time.

Jonathan Maus ([43:16](#)):

Yeah. Well, it's interesting you mentioned that report on bridge condition, because I know that there are some people at Washington DOT and Oregon DOT that are going to be happy to show that report and talk about the really bad condition of the Columbia River Crossing Bridge, the interstate bridge, and say, hey, this is why we need this project. The only thing is the problem I see with the project is that they're expanding five miles of freeway, not that they want to just replace a bridge. I think if they just focused on a bridge, not only could it be a lot cheaper, but they'd have a lot less opposition. But I think that's where they're running into trouble is that they're trying to take off way too big of a piece of this just to expand their freeway, because that's really what they love to do.

Jonathan Maus ([43:56](#)):

And so they're inviting all this opposition, and they're trying to couch the opposition as just being against a bridge, which isn't really what's happening. People don't like a big freeway project. So anyway, that's an interesting dynamic that's going to play out. And I bet I'll be making some phone calls to your office later in the next coming months really, because they're about to try to come to an agreement with a locally preferred design for the interstate bridge, the whole project. So that's going to be interesting. But before I let you go, I want to switch gears a little bit here, and then I'll ask you just a few questions at the end. I find when I talk to people like you, I end up not really talking a lot about bicycling specifically, just because there are so many other issues, and I know you're not necessarily, and maybe I'm wrong, but you're not necessarily a bike centric, bike first person in general.

Jonathan Maus ([44:43](#)):

But I did want to ask you about biking as a slice of the transportation issue. I mean, from your perspective, first of all, I personally think it is something that we need to talk about more, and specifically, because as you know, if you don't talk about something, it's easy to forget about it. And I do think it's a really effective way to achieve a lot of the goals and the values that a lot of people have for transportation, and just for livability in general. So I wonder, what do you think could make bicycling sort of hold more sway in these conversations and have more political capital in our region right now?

Khanh Pham ([45:18](#)):

I think, again, we need to make biking more accessible to ordinary people, and that can mean everything from subsidizing bikes so that it's really affordable for everybody to have bikes. Looking into electric bikes as well as a mode of transportation. And how can we invest? I've heard about some exciting programs to get to subsidize electric bikes for low income households, just introducing people, making it accessible, giving people the gear. I know for me, I was one big obstacle for me was figuring out, and it still is, figuring out that what the gear I need is to be safe. And of course, slowing down traffic so I feel safe biking next to a lane that's right next to the street. But I ultimately, I think people need to be given the subsidies, the tools, the incentives to be able to try it out so it's not seen as kind of a privileged mode of transportation, but really as an everyday.

Khanh Pham ([46:13](#)):

Because actually, the first time I started biking was in Vietnam, and that was just at the time, in 1998, it was actually still a mode of transportation that people still used back then. And it was, yeah, everybody just biked and it was so beautiful. I mean, some of the most moving things, I actually saw men bike arm and arm next to each other, and a line of like four or five, and they were arm and arm biking next to each other. They were young college students, but it was both really beautiful about just challenging all these kind of toxic masculinity ideas, and also just that we had a transportation system where people could actually do that on the road. So I definitely have a vision that biking doesn't have to be this thousand dollar bike with spandex. That can be just a regular part of getting to the grocery store, getting to school and back. So I have that vision still in my heart.

Jonathan Maus ([47:09](#)):

I'm actually glad to go back, I'm glad you mentioned something about the e-bike subsidy, because I just think that to me is just, I just want to yell about it from the rooftops. And that is just such a no-brainer thing, in my opinion, given how powerful these new e-bikes are and how, I mean, in terms of not powerful the motors necessarily, but in changing people's lives and bringing the benefits of bicycling to

tons and tons more people who didn't think they could before they had a little bit of boost from a battery. So I really hope that you see a bill sooner than later. Maybe not this session, but next session from folks. I know there's a lot of sort of advocacy folks working on that and it's kind of in the ether, but nothing's dropped.

Khanh Pham ([47:46](#)):

I would welcome any policy idea, policy concepts.

Jonathan Maus ([47:49](#)):

Okay, great. Everybody, I hope you heard that so you know who to email.

Khanh Pham ([47:51](#)):

Yeah. It's rep.khanhpham@oregonlegislature.gov.

Jonathan Maus ([47:55](#)):

Awesome. Okay. So, okay. So let's see. Last couple things here. So I want to go back. So you have a younger daughter, and she still lives around 82nd in the J District, right? And I know you've brought her up in the past about her experience getting through the neighborhood. So in the next five years, how do you want her experience to be different than it is today in getting around the neighborhood without a car?

Khanh Pham ([48:19](#)):

She's seven years old right now. And in five years I want her to be able to feel safe walking to the grocery store, some of the markets. We have little tiny Chinese markets in our street, in our neighborhood. I want her to be able to walk to school on her own and be able to cross 82nd Avenue happily with her friends. Well, I want her to feel safe, and I want also all parents and families to feel safe letting their kids just be able to explore and experience that kind of autonomy. I think it's so important to kids development to be able to have some autonomy and explore their neighborhoods. But right now we're depriving so many kids of that because we're petrified. Without sidewalks, I mean, these cars are speeding by and there's nothing to protect kids from these 2000 pound metal contraption.

Khanh Pham ([49:14](#)):

So I guess my vision is that she is able to really explore her own independence. I would love for her to have that experience with her friends in a safe environment where she's able to breathe clean air. We also have almost double the asthma rate right now, because we have these huge orphan highways, tons of diesel emissions and not enough green space to kind of soak in some of those emissions. And of course with now the heat waves, I hope that she's able to have a cooler neighborhood too, where there's hopefully more trees, less pavement that's soaking in all the heat. So those are my visions and dreams for her. And yeah, I'm committed to working as hard as I can with community to make sure we see those changes happen.

Jonathan Maus ([49:56](#)):

Great. Thanks. And I'm so glad that you're going to have the potentially a role to play in actually achieving those things. And we'll be hopefully talking more about 82nd Avenue and the whole corridor,

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hopefully pretty soon here. So thank you so much, Rep Pham, for talking to me today. I really appreciate your time and good luck in the upcoming session.

Khanh Pham ([50:16](#)):

Thank you so much for having me on. I really enjoyed the conversation.

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