

Safe and healthy urban arterials

Urban arterials are roadways where people live, work, and play. In many of greater Portland's most racially and ethnically diverse communities, urban arterials are home to vibrant businesses, affordable housing, parks and schools. Some of these roadways are also major car and freight truck routes and serve some of the busiest buses. Investments along urban arterials are critical to implementing the region's shared vision.



pollution and urban heat islands affect people near these roads. Improving urban arterials is important to advancing equity in the region.

Purpose

Urban arterials are an important part of the 2023 Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). This document summarizes a policy brief – that describes existing conditions, existing policies, challenges and policy considerations related to urban arterials.

Urban arterials (illustrated below on Map 1) usually connect to regional centers and freeways, and are critical to the transit network. They typically have speeds of at least 35 mph with four or more travel lanes and they carry tens of thousands of vehicles per day. They also serve as major freight truck routes and connect to industrial areas within and outside of the region. These complex and important corridors require a new approach to coordinated planning and investment in order to address their unique needs.

Why is a new approach needed?

Land use and economic development

The [2040 Growth Concept](#) imagines urban arterials as well-developed community centers. However, safety, design and zoning issues can hinder economic development.

Equity

About two-thirds of urban arterial mileage is in areas with higher populations of people of color and people with lower incomes. Decades of underinvestment has led to increased safety and health issues that disproportionately impact these communities. Air and noise

Mobility

Many people in the region get where they need to go every day using urban arterials.

Dedicated right of way for buses and improved bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, among other improvements, can improve mobility along these roads.

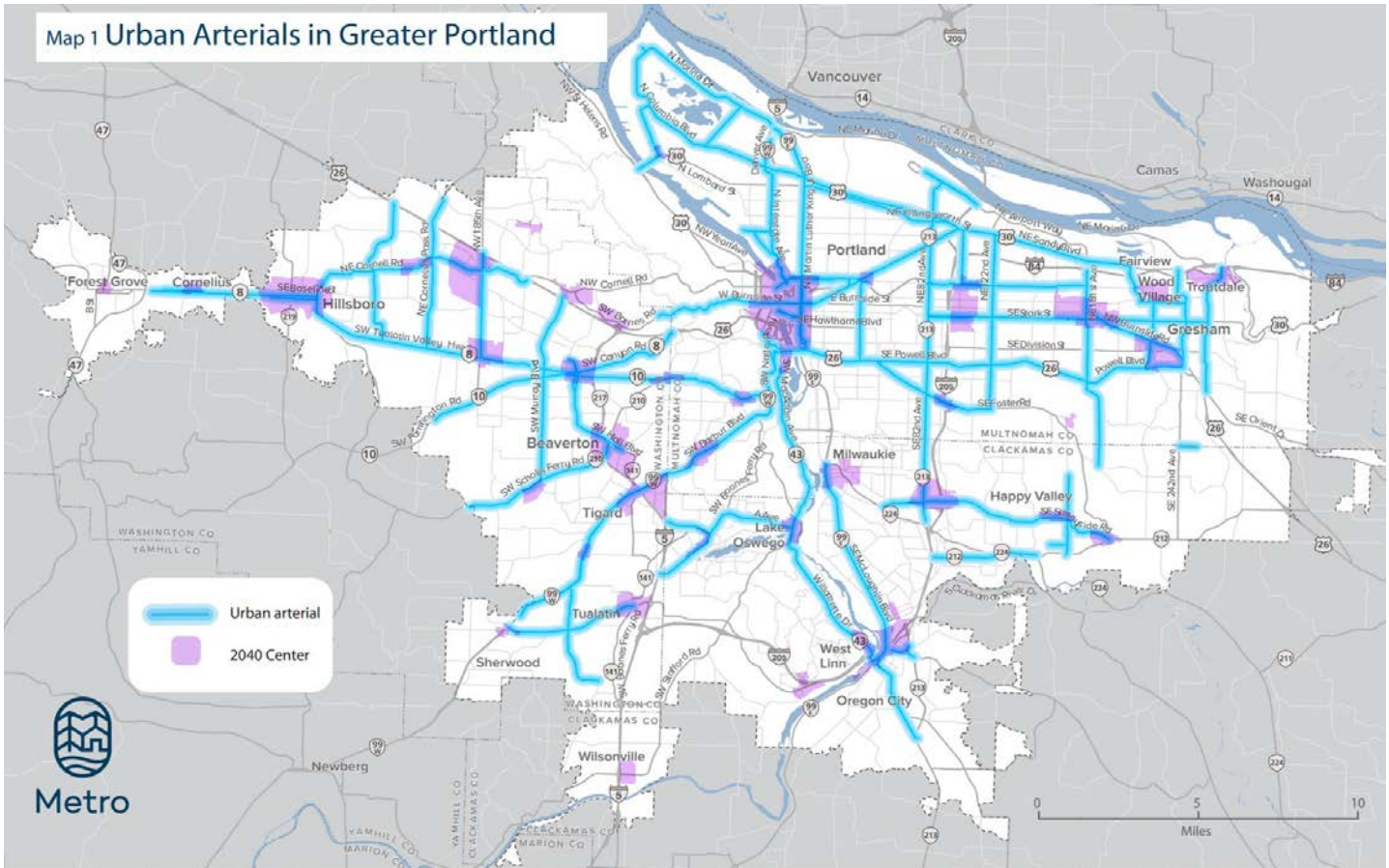
Safety

Urban arterials account for more than forty percent of serious and fatal crashes while representing only five percent of the roadway miles within the region. These roads are more dangerous due to a combination of high traffic speeds and volumes, more lanes, a mix of travel modes and auto-oriented design and land uses. These safety issues are exacerbated for pedestrians and bicyclists.

Why now?

The region has a strong history of collaboration among transportation agencies and land use authorities, as well as a comprehensive policy framework laid out in the Regional Transportation Plan. However, several challenges still stand in the way of significant progress on urban arterials.

The region's vision for these arterials can be achieved with a coordinated regional effort to address safety challenges and an approach for funding deficits and improving and maintaining these roadways.



Note: Map 1 is included for illustrative purposes. Updates to the 2023 RTP motor vehicle functional classifications map will likely include new major arterials and other changes to the motor vehicle functional classifications.

Challenges

Policy and design

There are many ongoing challenges in achieving safe and complete streets. As the functions and visions for urban arterials shift, many state-owned arterials now no longer serve their stated functional purpose. This creates ‘orphan highways’ – roadways in which it is not clear who is leading their improvement effort. Further, design standards and state laws tend to prioritize motor vehicle throughput over multimodal designs and safety improvements for pedestrians and bicyclists. This makes it difficult to make progress on many issues relating to urban arterials.

Funding

Improving urban arterials can be expensive and complex, especially for smaller jurisdictions. Oftentimes capital and maintenance needs are greater than available funding. Urban arterials have no dedicated funding sources. Additionally, there is a lack of identified or prioritized projects that comprehensively address the gaps and deficiencies along urban arterials.

Building on what is working

The Portland region has a long history of investments and collaboration among state, regional, and local transportation agencies.

Decades of work has led to many successes in improving safety along urban arterial corridors. Coordinated investment areas planning, the 2020 regional transportation funding measure, and updates to the Regional Mobility Policy have created a strong foundation for future work.

Moving forward

Regional leaders will be exploring new options on how to address the challenges on urban arterials. This will shape the 2023 RTP update and guide a new approach to urban arterials. For more information please refer to the [Safe and Healthy Urban Arterials 2023 RTP Policy Brief](#).