

My View: More roads needed to handle growth

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It is not easy to be a professional economist in Portland. We live on a steady diet of misinformation — some benign like the candidate for City Council who wanted to bar cars from the urban core and some malign like builders who explain that knocking down older affordable homes to make room for McMansions will solve a housing crisis.

Mary Kyle McCurdy's guest commentary, "More roads don't ease congestion" (June 14 Tribune), is a case in point. It is a good eye-catching title, but that is the best that can be said about it. First, let's start with the facts. At a given level of population and employment, more lanes do reduce congestion and enhance travel times. It also reduces emissions (cars parked on snarled expressways do not really turn off their engines), and encourages economic development.

What McCurdy would have you believe is that eating food will not assuage hunger since you will be hungry tomorrow and — worse — your enhanced welfare may well encourage you to have more children. And, of course, these hungry children will create a food shortage.

I suspect that McCurdy did not attend the 2016 Harold Vatter lecture at Portland State University in May. We invited the noted Harvard professor Dr. Edward Glaeser, who specializes in the economics of urban centers. His lecture, "Big Data and Big Cities," focused on the question of urbanization using economic data and analysis. The reality is that urbanization involves a conflict between economic benefits of urbanization and the costs of infrastructure. And while McCurdy's views involve penalizing residents and businesses for needing infrastructure, the reality — again proved by real analysis and real data — is the exact opposite. Growth contributes to the overall health of the community, even when infrastructure requires investment.

One last comment on her data. She states, "The Portland region has been driving less since 1996." Of course, she forgets to note that car registrations and gasoline sales are rapidly outpacing population growth today. The statistics — backed by everyday experience of anyone who has driven recently — show that the number of cars is increasing and the need for substantive solutions is increasing with them.

Washington County is the local leader in job growth. If they are to continue to grow, we will need more infrastructure to support that growth.

Does this mean that we should automatically endorse the proposed freeway? No, of course not. Infrastructure improvements need careful study. The key, however, is that we will not have growth without infrastructure. While we have been deafened by the rhetoric that we are facing rapid population growth, the reality is that for a midsize U.S. industrial city, our employment growth is low, our housing prices high, our infrastructure is appalling, and our birth rate is close to nonexistent.

For us to assume growth and not plan to support it is simply bad planning.

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