Imagine today’s typical state department of transportation and it’s likely that an agency devoted to the automobile and its highway needs (and conspicuously fond of orthodox thinking) comes to mind. Certainly---in the United States at least---it’s easy to confuse transportation as just another word for power-driven vehicles. Which is why conversations about sustainability quickly get around to acknowledging that how we get from Point A to Point B illustrates how far we have to travel before achieving anything remotely close to a sustainable state of mind.

And which also explains how pleasantly surprised we were to learn that the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) has recently collaborated on a project in the Portland (OR) metropolitan area to improve the I-205 Multi-Use Path that now makes up a part of one of the area's major transportation corridors. We spoke with Shelli Romero, Public Policy and Community Affairs Manager at ODOT to learn more.

Although state departments of transportation are perceived as traditionally focused on car- and road-centric projects, in 2009, ODOT agreed to work with Friends of Trees, a local non-profit organization, to pursue a grant proposal designed to support the greening of a 16.5 mile corridor paralleling Interstate 205. The addition of thousands of trees and shrubs to this corridor fit in nicely with ODOT’s vision which began about six years prior to improve the I-205 Multi-Use Path. Once secured, the three-year $410,000 grant, funded by Metro Nature in Neighborhoods and requiring a 3:1 match, was used to plant native vegetation along the route with the goal of enhancing the right-of-way as a more aesthetically pleasing choice and experience for bicyclists, pedestrians and other transit users.

Because the route connects five communities and 15 neighborhoods (including an industrial area), and intertwines with the local light-rail system as well as a major interstate artery it represents an important---and well-traveled---transportation corridor in the Portland area. (For example, using the I-205 Multi-Use Path and contiguous public transit, it is possible to travel from PDX airport to downtown Portland.) Through improvements to the Multi-Use Path, ODOT and its partners have helped raise awareness that transportation is not just about the car or even mass transit. The choices are far broader than either of those options, and open a window onto a different approach to how we organize our lives.

Along the way, this multi-award-winning project of creative partnerships has managed to involve metro-wide communities and volunteers. It has also generated temporary green jobs and on-the-job training opportunities in landscaping and other activities, as well as opportunities to serve as crew leaders with Friends of Trees and two other non-profits that serve disadvantaged young people and communities of color. Romero emphasizes that, in addition to placing trees and shrubs to enhance a right-of-way for alternative transportation, the project has also come to be seen as an important pathway to creating and investing in communities located in a previously “under-resourced” area. In fact, its specific mission, she says, is to support “transportation, environment and equity,” with anticipated ripple effects far beyond the confines of the I-205 Multi-Use Path itself.
In reflecting on progress thus far, Romero credits a broad recognition across ODOT—including management, maintenance and operations, and community affairs staff—and among its partners that the project required a high level of creative thinking as a means of addressing a complex set of issues. For ODOT, she says, the project represents a significant shift in thinking about transportation and partnership, as well a new direction for how it undertakes projects. Moreover, collaboration across the board paved the way for fresh insights into optimal solutions. For example, Friends of Trees and ODOT worked closely together to determine the appropriate setback and spacing for new tree and shrub plantings and collaborated on the selection of the appropriate tree and shrub species along particular areas of the route.

Since the route traverses a diverse cross-section of communities and zoning categories, it was important that it be viewed as a genuinely multi-use resource—encompassing both recreation and commuter purposes. For similar reasons, says Romero, two other critical success factors for the project lay in its ability to achieve—and maintain—high visibility, and its steady focus on the entire community (with a Capital C) of neighborhoods that it traverses. In that sense, the I-205 Multi-Use Path is truly a living and complex resource on many levels, rather than just a means of transportation.

**Sustainability Leadership in Action**

While the I-205 Multi-Use Path encourages new transit solutions to old problems, it also illustrates that new approaches to leadership can make a critical difference. For example, this is a story of shared leadership, creativity and collective wisdom converging to achieve out-of-the-ordinary results. We can see at work here the impact of leveraging partnerships, and a genuine interest in ensuring that a broad range of alternative viewpoints can help lead to optimal outcomes. We also see an effective collaboration of experts, both at the grass roots level as well as throughout the diverse neighborhoods in the Corridor Community that has begun to emerge as a result of this project. Finally, this story demonstrates that sustainable thinking requires a holistic perspective in order to appreciate, understand and respond effectively to issues in their full complexity.

You can see the project in motion by watching [Multi-Use Path YouTube](#).

For more information go to [I-205 Multi-Use Path](#), or contact *Shelli Romero*, with ODOT Region 1. Phone: 503.731-8231

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