

## Where the car is not king

*In the second of Newsnight's series on finding the best public services in the world, Conservative Party Vice Chair Sayeeda Warsi reports on efforts to overhaul public transport in one US city.*

By Sayeeda Warsi  
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### **If you thought political cross-dressing was a recent British phenomenon, you obviously haven't been to Portland.**

In Oregon they were 'cross dressing' as far back as the 1970's when the Republican Governor, Tom McCall, took radical steps to prioritise public transport over roads, using the freeways levy to invest in the foundations of what is undoubtedly one of the most integrated and dynamic public transport provisions anywhere in the world.

Today, the city still invests its share of federal tax dollars into multiple modes of transport, and its long-term vision has paid off.

Over the last 10 years, public transport use has gone up by 65% and they have managed to avoid a predicted 40% increase in congestion.

And, incredibly for a city in the world's most car dependent nation, they're eradicating over 62 million car trips a year, which means car use is growing at the slowest rate anywhere in the United States.

### **Challenge**

**A challenge set by the Department of Transportation and Flexcar, a car-sharing business, [aims] to show just how easy and economical it is to use public transport**

As the Commons environmental audit committee was lamenting the fact that bus use is falling in every region of England apart from London, I was taking my first bus ride in years with Sarah Gilbert and Jonathan Hanson, two car-dependent Portlanders who have agreed to give up their beloved Mercedes SUV for a month and survive on public transport alone.

They're taking part in a challenge set by the Department of Transportation and Flexcar, a car-sharing business, to show just how easy and economical it is to use public transport.

Sarah, Jonathan and their two children have found using a mixture of Portland's integrated light rail, bus, streetcar, cycle lanes and free city centre transport far easier than they thought.

In fact they're now going to sell their SUV.

The benefits of a car-free diet for public health and the environment are huge. At a time when greenhouse gas emissions America wide have risen by 13%, in Portland they're down to pre 1990 levels. Here they've got an eye on global issues and are responding with local answers.

It is exactly the type of responsible governance that Britain needs.

### **Car junkies**

In Portland, using public transport comes as second nature. Arriving at the airport it didn't cross my

mind to use anything other than a taxi; at the end of the week Max light rail was the only natural choice.

Car junkies like me are becoming endangered species in this city.

But Portland isn't just about successfully getting people out of their cars. What's really clear, is the extent to which transport is the absolute bedrock of community development.

The city is an international pioneer in transit orientated developments, high-density, residential and business units around light-rail stops and transit centres.

Portland's Transportation Commissioner, Sam Adams, puts the city's success down to 3 main factors: the marriage of transportation and land use issues, public and private partnership, and clear results.

Here, they're not afraid to pioneer and push the boundaries. And it works.

Moreover, by enabling and empowering local communities to have a voice through the city's 150 local government funded community and business associations, they've got everyone pulling in the same direction.

### **Cycle lanes**

It's great to see public and private sector working hand in hand delivering the best public transport for its community.

Sitting on the light rail on my way to the airport I notice a cycle lane running beside me - all the way to the terminal.

Cycling traffic has increased by 257% in the city over the last ten years and members of the cycling community I spoke to told me they feel they have a lot of support from local government in making the city even more bike friendly.

Portland really is an example of true direct democracy in action.

**Sayeeda Warsi's film on public transport in Portland, Oregon will be show on Newsnight on BBC Two in the UK and on the Newsnight website at 2130GMT/2230BST on Tuesday 15 August.**

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