

Testimony of Rodger Nichols,  
Wasco County Appointee to the Columbia River Gorge Commission  
in support of HB 2039  
before the House Committee on Rural Communities, Land Use and Water  
February 26, 2015

Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify on a bill that could have significant impact on Oregon's (and Washington's) only National Scenic Area and the tens of millions of dollars brought into the state by the millions of annual visitors.

I have had a unique perspective to observe the Columbia River Gorge Commission over an extended time. From 2003 to 2011 I covered the Commission for The Dalles Chronicle, and was the only reporter for any medium regularly attending Commission meetings. In 2011, I was appointed by Wasco County to serve as its representative to the Commission itself.

In the past dozen years, I have watched the Commission move from tackling big issues to barely keeping the doors open, and that only by the heroic effort of a dedicated staff.

In December, 2008, as budget cuts caused the staff to dwindle, the Commission voted that it would no longer accept requests to amend the Management Plan nor any requests to consider any changes in Urban Area Boundaries. It's been more than six years since the Commission's capacity dropped below that critical level, and today it has shrunk to just five people.

Governor Kitzhaber got the message and this year proposed a whopping 89% increase in Oregon's share of the budget. That it would take that big an increase just to get us back where we were is an indication of how far the budget has fallen. But Governor Jay Inslee has proposed only a minuscule increase, which Oregon would have to match under the current terms of the bi-state compact that controls our destiny.

I'm hoping the task force that would come out of this bill would take a serious look at the most crippling provision of the bi-state compact, the requirement that both states fund the commission equally. That has held our budget hostage to whichever of the two states is in the worst financial condition at budget time. It has resulted in a race to the bottom that benefits neither the people of the gorge nor the millions of visitors who come bearing sizable contributions to both states' economies.

Another key issue would be the unnecessary duplication of budget and accounting processes that the Commission is forced to endure due to the different requirements of the two states. These processes are expensive, time-consuming and don't add value. They cost us close to a FTE each year, and with a staff down to just five, that's a deadly anchor on productivity.

Thank you for taking time to listen to my testimony today. If you have further questions, I would be happy to answer them.

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