

March 22, 2017

**HB 2749 & HB 2750**  
**HOOD RIVER BRIDGE REPLACEMENT PROJECT**

*Testimony to:*

Oregon House of Representatives  
Committee Transportation Policy Committee  
Chair, Caddy McKeown

by:

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Chair McKeown and members of the Committee. My name is Michael McElwee. I serve a five-member elected board as the Executive Director of the Port of Hood River. Our Port District encompasses about half of Hood River County. I am here to describe the need to replace the Hood River Bridge and ask your support of **HB 2749** and **HB 2750**, legislation that will enable us to take the next steps forward. I am grateful for the introduction and strong support and sponsorship of these bills by Representative Johnson and Senator Thomsen.

There is wide recognition of the need to rebuild and replace aging infrastructure in our State. You are leaders in this effort and we applaud the work of the legislature to pass a significant transportation funding package this session to address maintenance, preservation, seismic resiliency, congestion challenges with our state's transportation system. The Hood River/White Salmon Interstate Bridge can and should be addressed this year as well. It is a critical transportation link in the economy of the Columbia River Gorge. But due to its age, condition, and vital role in the regional transportation network the next major steps must be taken soon so that it can be replaced in the next 10 years.

**BACKGROUND**

Our Bridge was constructed under authority of the Bridge Act of 1906. In 1923 Congress authorized the Oregon/Washington Bridge Company, a private company, to construct, own and operate a bridge between Hood River and Bingen. The toll rate was \$1 for autos, 75 cents for a head of cattle and 50 cents for a bicycle. In 1939, the lift span was added and much of the Bridge was rebuilt due to the construction of Bonneville Dam. Ten years later, the Oregon legislature passed ORS 381 allowing the ownership of interstate bridges by municipalities. In 1950, the bridge was offered to public agencies and private companies on both sides of the river. All declined except the Port of Hood River. The Port acquired the bridge and all the rights of the Oregon/Washington Bridge Company for \$800,000. The toll rate at that time was 50

cents for automobiles and 50 cents per truck axle. In sixty-seven years the Port has invested about \$40 million in capital upgrades and improvements. In 2006, we established the first electronic tolling system in Oregon called BreezeBy. The toll rate was set at 75 cents. In 2012, the cash toll was raised to \$1 for single-axle vehicles and 83 cents for BreezeBy customers. In 2016, over 4 million vehicles crossed the bridge and there were over 10,000 BreezeBy accounts. This year the Port will install a major upgrade to the electronic toll collection (ETC) system to allow for real-time accounting processes as well as access to a customer web portal for BreezeBy customers.

### **WHY SHOULD IT BE REPLACED?**

There are significant and increasingly important reasons why steps must be taken now to ensure that the Bridge is replaced within the next decade.

- The Bridge is functionally obsolete and carries a sufficiency rating of 49.8. The steel deck is significantly under-sized for vehicle freight crossings, with only two very narrow (9' 4" wide), shoulder-less travel lanes.
- The bridge is weight restricted to 80,000 lbs. A fully loaded fruit truck hauling fresh pears for processing weighs on average 105,500 lbs. Regional vehicle freight companies rely upon the Bridge for movement of Oregon fruit and forest products, building materials and locally manufactured products such as glass windows and doors and aviation technology components.
- The Bridge has no bicycle/pedestrian facilities and cannot support the addition of such facilities.
- The Bridge creates a significant bottleneck for traffic and emergency response during weather or other incident-caused closures of the I-84 freeway; occurring on average twice a year.
- The Bridge is regarded as the most hazardous obstacle on the federal inland waterway system for the marine freight navigating the Columbia River; a primary conduit for U.S. wheat, soy, wood products and mineral bulk exports. More than 9 million tons of commercial cargo traveled under the Bridge's lift span in 2012.
- The Bridge is seismically deficient and would likely incur catastrophic failure in a CSZ earthquake or one caused by local faults near Mt. Hood. This is important because the 2016 Governor's Transportation Vision Panel identified seismic resiliency in the Columbia Gorge river, road and rail corridor as a priority.

In sum, the Bridge is nearly 80 years old and is nearing the end of its useful life. Catastrophic failure or reducing the weight limit would have severe economic and social effects on the bi-state communities, and economy, of the Gorge.

## **WHAT HAS BEEN DONE TO DATE**

Planning began over ten years ago. In 2003, a Draft Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision were completed. In 2012, a Type, Size & Location Study was completed. In 2015 an amendment was included in the FAST ACT designating projects within National Scenic Areas as expressly eligible for program funding. In 2016 the Bridge designated as part of the National Highway System, it was added to the Critical Rural Freight Network by WADOT, a Project Benefit Cost Analysis was completed. Most recently, the Port submitted a small grant application to the federal FASTLANE program to fund preconstruction activities. Total associated costs to date exceed \$1.8 million, funded primarily with federal and local dollars.

## **PATHWAYS TO REPLACEMENT**

Options for replacement of the Hood River Bridge range from a typical public Design/Bid/Build or Design/Build project to a public-private partnership (P3) led by a private entity via an agreement with the Port. The Port is seeking to ensure that all options remain viable at this uncertain time in terms of infrastructure financing.

## **WHAT IS NEEDED**

To enable the Port and its partners to begin making progress towards identifying and pursuing the appropriate pathway to replacement, two actions are needed by the 2017 Oregon Legislature:

- **HB 2750** would convey certain statutory authorities relating to bridge replacement to the Port. While ORS 383 contemplates ODOT serving as the public partner in a Public/Private partnership, the statutes are ambiguous regarding the Port serving as a public partner. HB 2750 would make clear that capability so to enable a P3 project if that is determined to be the best way forward.
- **HB 2749** would provide \$5 million in State funds to complete the next crucial steps necessary to position the Bridge replacement project that would allow it to compete for federal funding under the FAST ACT or lay the groundwork for a P3 project. The specific tasks that would be carried out include review and updates to the Draft EIS and TS&L Study, completion of the Final EIS, geotechnical work, financial modeling, community outreach and 10% design & engineering. A formal work and decision structure will be established that incorporates the Port, ODOT, WSDOT, and other affected Oregon and Washington jurisdictions agencies. Each of these steps is necessary whether a public project or PPP is ultimately selected. We have a high degree of confidence that the level of funding we are requesting is sufficient to cover the necessary tasks. However, the permitting and pre-development process does have uncertainty

as to completion timeframe and cost. The Port is will utilize its own funds if actual costs exceed the state contribution.

Without legislative help, the Port's ability to take the next major steps towards bridge replacement will be greatly diminished. The Port would need to focus almost exclusively on keeping the existing bridge safe and operational for as long as possible. Capital funding demands for upgrades and repairs will increase. And prospects for either a reduced weight limit. or of a sudden closure from earthquake or vessel strike, will grow by the year.

### **CONCLUSION**

As a toll facility owned by a public agency, replacement of the Hood River Bridge presents unique state, local, and federal funding opportunities as well as the potential for innovative public/private partnerships. My elected board believes it is our obligation to aggressively pursue bridge replacement efforts so that construction of a new, replacement bridge can occur within 10 years. Even with toll revenue, our Port does not have the capacity to carry out this project alone. The Port seeks your support of **HB 2749** and **HB 2750** this legislative session so that we can achieve meaningful progress.