

DATE: May 9, 2017  
TO: Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources  
FROM: Mark Buckley  
SUBJECT: WRITTEN TESTIMONY IN OPPOSITION TO HB 2027

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**Chair and Committee Members,**

I submit this letter as written testimony in opposition to House Bill 2027, specifically the prohibitions on a pedestrian bridge over the Deschutes River for the purposes of connecting sections of the Deschutes River Trail. I am a resident of Bend, Oregon and a homeowner on the west side of Bend. While this testimony is as a private concerned citizen and local resident, I bring to bear my experience as a PhD economist, partner, and lead for the natural resources practice area at ECONorthwest, the Oregon-based economic consulting firm. My work focuses on informing public policy concerning natural resource management decisions, including forests, water, conservation objectives, recreation, benefits both market and non-market, and regional economic impacts. I have not been financially compensated for this testimony. In this testimony I identify the several benefits I see from the bridge, and calculate a 20-year discounted value for a subset of these benefits at \$40 million.

In my expert work in Oregon for federal agencies (USFS, BLM, USEPA, NRCS, DOJ, USACE, BOR), state (ODF, DOE, Travel Oregon) and numerous local, we nearly always seek investment or management options that provide the most local benefit within a set of larger constraints, including ecological conservation objectives. Debates in Oregon have generally involved conflict between resource consumption objectives such as timber production or land development that directly generate income and create jobs vs. habitat preservation objectives that provide benefits that do not always manifest as local economic opportunity. We are increasingly finding that outdoor recreation opportunities provide both for protection, appreciation, stewardship, and support for natural resources while also serving local communities and their economies. For example I was surprised to see from our recent work for BLM how much more economically important outdoor recreation is than timber production from BLM's western Oregon lands<sup>1</sup>.

**Importance of Outdoor Recreation Access**

DHM Research's surveys of Oregonians repeatedly find that Oregon's natural beauty and access are the things residents value the most about living in Oregon, and these are the first things non-Oregonians think of when surveyed as well. Access to Oregon's environment is most fully actualized in Bend, and the region's community and economy are growing because of it. This all at a time that urbanization is intensifying and rural populations are generally declining, losing businesses and jobs. Outdoor recreation is highly accessible in Oregon, but the just-out-the-door options are more limited. Even as Portland's reputation for quality-of-life

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<sup>1</sup> Bureau of Land Management. 2016. <https://www.blm.gov/or/plans/rmpswesternoregon/>.

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grows, its residents typically need to spend more and more time in a car to access worthwhile trails. Close-to-home options get people outside more frequently, away from televisions and computers, fighting trends in declining public health. I have worked for the city of Portland and Portland Metro to find ways to address some of the greatest trail and nature scarcities within the region, and the options are limited.

Close-to-home access to high quality outdoor amenities is a scarce resource, facing increasing demand, and Bend is best situated to provide that amenity within Oregon. This means trails within town that connect Bend residents to their surrounding environment. The Deschutes River Trail is the centerpiece of this access and linkage. Currently, private property and development block an uninterrupted forest trail along the Deschutes River from town out to the national forest. Leaving the river to walk along roads for miles around these barriers defeats the purpose of the trail experience. So residents and visitors get in their car and drive a few miles out of town to begin their hikes, rather than starting from where they live. This means fewer total trips, lower quality trips, traffic congestion, vehicle emissions, and a reduced quality and value of the key amenity that makes Bend a desirable place to live and open a business.

### Importance of Close-to-Home Trails in Bend

We recently completed a property value (hedonic) analysis in Bend to assess the contribution of parks and trails to property value. Homes close to parks and trails sell for on average \$11,000 more than otherwise. This doesn't capture the overall premium for living in Bend and the overall quality and access to parks and trails. Half of all homes in Bend are within a quarter mile of a trail, and nearly all are within 1 mile of a trail. Bend Parks and Recreation District's efforts to develop trails reaching all neighborhoods, and connecting to the central Deschutes River Trail means that any improvements to the Deschutes River Trail can have real benefits for nearly all Bend residents. There are complementary benefits as well, as improvements to one part of the trail and park system can make other areas more useful and valuable via network effects. In the most recent OPRD survey of all resident outdoor recreation participation (SCORP<sup>2</sup>), 76 percent of Bend residents reported local trail walking in comparison to 61 percent for state residents as a whole. Residents aren't driving to Sunriver or Tumalo State Park to hike the entire Deschutes River Trail in one direction; they are looking for a variety of trip options with the least total travel time. The more connected the overall trail system supporting Bend, the more options there are in terms of destination and trip length close to home.

Making Bend a more desirable place to live attracts and retains skilled professional workers, entrepreneurs, and visitors all of which are transforming Bend from purely a tourist destination to a regional economic engine.

### Valuation of Select Benefits of the Deschutes River Trail

As a Bend resident, the key values I see of the bridge allowing full connection of the Deschutes River Trail from town out to the national forest as (and beneficiaries):

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<sup>2</sup> Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan Survey

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- **More, longer, better trail options from town** (all residents and visitors)
  - **Avoided driving time from east side to west side** (east side residents)
  - **Avoided driving time from town out to trailheads** (west, central residents and visitors)
  - **Reduced traffic, congestion, and vehicle emissions** (all residents and visitors)
  - **Shorter travel time so more frequent trips and more time on trail** (all residents and visitors).

As a quick, representative calculation to estimate the economic value of a portion of these benefits, I've calculated the trips affected and avoided driving time. The most recent estimate is 83,500 Bend residents (2016), with approximately 76 percent participating in local trail walking. The statewide average is 51 trail walking trips annually per participant, although OPRD survey data (SCORP) specific to Bend residents suggests closer to 100 annual trips per participant. This doesn't include additional reported trail usage that might be additive including trail running, trail biking, dog walking, and other nature-based activities (photography, etc.). If we assume 75 local trail trips per participant, for an average of 57 trips per Bend resident, this equates to 4.8 million local trail walking trips by residents as of Bend's 2016 population.

Park District trail counters suggest that the Deschutes River Trail and the South Canyon section towards where the bridge would be as the most heavily used trails by locals and visitors. If we assume 20 percent of residents live in southeast and southwest Bend on the east side of the river, and half of their trips would utilize the bridge instead of driving to a more distant trailhead, this equates to 476,000 annual trips. Estimated travel time without traffic from the east side of the river to the west side (e.g. River Rim Park to Entrada Lodge) is 15 minutes each way, for a 30-minute total driving time. Taking Bend's median wage (\$16) and a third of that to represent the value of leisure time (a typical transportation assumption) equates to a \$1.3 million annual value to residents who would avoid the drive to the west side to access trails.

For the remainder of Bend residents, if even a tenth of local trail walking trips are affected by the bridge, and again only counting the avoided travel time costs in this case estimated as drive time from downtown (average representative distance) to Entrada Lodge (nearest trailhead) of 12 minutes each way, this would equate to an additional \$812,000 annual time saved value. These estimates do not include the effect the bridge would likely have of increased frequency and quality of trips, and benefits for other types of trail use. This also doesn't include benefits to visitors, likely in the neighborhood of an additional 25 percent based on Visit Bend and SCORP data.

These calculations also represent, assuming two passengers per vehicle, 428,000 fewer annual vehicle round trips through the increasingly congested Century Drive and Reed Market Road area. Avoiding these trips would reduce travel delays for all users of these corridors, including workers, students, and residents.

Taking only the value of reduced travel time for resident calculations, and applying a 3 percent discount rate and the 2.2 percent annual population growth rate for Bend as forecasted by the

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Portland State University Population Research Center and Bend Urban Growth Boundary process, the 20 year value of the bridge would be **\$39.8 million**.

### West Side and Ecological Considerations

I understand that most of the opposition comes from homeowners in the immediate vicinity of the west side of the proposed bridge crossing, and criticisms regarding the ecological effects of increased trail use. I am a west side resident of Bend, and I would appreciate the opportunity to walk from town as far as I want along the river, and see reduced traffic on the increasingly-congested weekends as people drive out to the national forest trails. And from an environmental perspective, reduced vehicle miles clearly have an effect on carbon, NO<sub>x</sub>, SO<sub>x</sub>, and particulate emissions locally.

Environmental stewardship is a product of appreciation for the environment, so the more you can have people out appreciating the river and forest, the more they will be willing to support and change behaviors to protect the resources. The area immediately upstream and downstream of the bridge is already heavily used. I hike, bike, and kayak this area frequently. The water quality and bank vegetation are visibly in good shape, particularly given how little fluctuation in flow levels there are, and resulting low rates of erosion. If anything concerns me with the riparian corridor it would be the homes right next to the river with yards near water level and with no natural vegetation buffers. The real constraints ecologically for this area are the extreme low flows during fall after irrigation season. I remember biking along the trail near Lava Falls a few autumns ago and the stink of the fish die-off was intense. I was upset by it, wrote a letter to a local paper, and generally have stayed involved in the process, including donations for efforts to increase instream flows. Discouraging use and access to the river is not the way to encourage support for the health of the Deschutes River, particularly for areas in such close vicinity to the city of Bend.

### Conclusions

I've spent quite a bit of time thinking about the value of trails, quality-of-life, and the environment surrounding Bend that makes it so special. I can't think of a higher return on investment than that offered by the linkage of the Deschutes River Trail the bridge could afford. I see many kinds of benefits that would affect nearly all Bend residents and a large portion of visitors. I believe an estimate of \$40 million over twenty years in terms of value from the bridge is conservative, considering all of the other benefit categories not quantified. And the bridge is an important signal and linchpin for the overall community identity and its economic trajectory, one of the fastest growing and most vibrant communities in Oregon.

Respectfully,



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