

Date: February 14, 2017

To: Senate Business and Transportation Committee

RE: Informational Hearing Senate Bill 256, 2/15, on
Willamette Falls Locks Commission

In December 2011, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) suddenly closed the 1873 Willamette Falls Navigation Canal and Locks, effectively cutting the Willamette River in two, preventing both commercial and recreational navigation past the falls. Tourist excursions, agricultural barges, and marine construction rigs were stranded.

The unexpected and indefinite closure catalyzed locks supporters. The 2012 “Most Endangered Place” listing by Restore Oregon helped draw sorely needed attention to the plight of this oldest operational navigation facility west of the Rockies. That same year, the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) recognized the Locks as a "National Treasure", which brought even more focus and some very welcome legal resources to the cause. So what has happened since then?

Spurred by the regional and national attention, and supported by an increasing breadth of allies and preservation advocates, the Willamette Falls Heritage Foundation and One Willamette River Coalition reheated their partnership with Clackamas County. The County, which owns and operates the historic Canby Ferry upstream from the Locks, also wanted to see the Locks inspected, repaired, opened and operated on a consistent basis.

Assisted by the NTHP, local stakeholders forced the initiation and completion—after the fact—of the National Historic Preservation Act's Section 106 process, which requires federal government agencies to avoid or mitigate harm to National Register properties in their care. The frustratingly slow but fruitful process, in which Restore Oregon participated, resulted in late 2016 in a signed Memorandum of Agreement between the COE and various stakeholders that includes specific steps for mitigating the ‘adverse effects’ of the 2011 closure on the Locks’ historic attributes and functions.

The COE has been very clear that it wants to transfer the Locks to a local entity because the Locks don’t provide the level of national economic benefit required to justify federal investment. To reach a decision, the COE has started a

comprehensive Disposition Study that is intended to be a national pilot for historic COE properties no longer seeing tonnages that justify funding. If the not successful in finding a new owner, it will begin a process to decommission and permanently close or remove the Locks.

Based upon the recommendation of a Legislative Task Force convened over the past year by former Governor Barbara Roberts, the WF Locks Working Group is asking the 2017 Legislature to form a Willamette Falls Locks Commission. The Commission would partner with the COE to negotiate an agreement on final 'disposal' of the historic facility – hopefully into the hands of a new owner-operator.

If the Locks are repaired and reopened, once again paddlers on the Willamette River National Water Trail will be able to make the lazy journey from Corvallis to Portland along one of the most beautiful rivers in America. Once again, companies whose tugs have plied the river for more than a century can move agricultural products and gravel for infrastructure projects down to Portland. Jet boats and tourist boats will carry visitors up to and around the stunning Willamette Falls, to soak up the breathtaking scenery or dock at the same Oregon City location where steamboats once disembarked their passengers. The Corvallis-to-Portland Regatta will be able once more to tuck its dozens of rowing sculls into the Locks' four narrow chambers, oars spread like water skippers.

We urge your support for SB 256. With the creation of a Willamette Falls Locks Commission, we can see the revitalization of a dynamic river community, once again spanning the Falls and connecting the upper and lower Willamette River for vibrant recreation, transportation and commercial uses.

Sincerely,

Sandy Carter, Locks Advocate

Coordinator, One Willamette River Coalition

Board Member, Willamette Falls Heritage Foundation, Inc.

