

Dear House Rules Committee

I'm writing to encourage you to table or reject HB 2974. It's a well-intended but poorly thought out bill that will complicate and work against, rather than for, meeting important transportation needs. There are several problems with the bill as proposed:

HB 2974 would create yet another layer of government - a regional bridge district - that would compete all the other levels of government and agencies that are already responsible for our transportation system: including ODOT, cities, counties, metropolitan planning organizations and transit districts. We already have enough agencies involved in planning and managing our transportation system, we shouldn't add another layer.

HB 2974 would create a dedicated funding source for new bridges without a vote of the people. The proposal for a bridge district has had virtually no public discussion or debate, and there is no evidence that voters in the affected counties support such a proposal, yet HB 2974 would put in place new taxes without any public vote.

HB 2974's earmarking of county-wide property taxes for bridges is inconsistent with the "user pays" principle. A hallmark of Oregon's approach to transportation funding is that users should pay in proportion to their use of the system. HB 2974's reliance on county-wide property taxes stand this principle on its head: it would require everyone to pay for bridges regardless of how much they use them and subsidize those who use bridges heavily.

HB 2974's voting structure is inconsistent with the basic democratic principle of one-person, one-vote. HB 2974 provides one representative from each of four counties with vastly different populations. More than half of the residents of the proposed bridge district live in Marion County, yet Marion County gets only 25% of the "county" votes on the bridge district board. This gives residents of less populated counties a disproportionate voice - and vote - in bridge decisions.

HB 2974 encourages piecemeal solutions to our transportation needs. A bridge district's only "tool" for addressing transportation problems would be more bridges. Often, as we found here in Salem, the problem with moving traffic across the Willamette isn't the bridges themselves, but rather the capacity of the roadways on either side. Building or widening bridges, by itself - which is all a bridge district can do - won't make the system work better. Experience shows we're better off if we plan for and manage our transportation system as a seamless "system" that considers a full range of possible solutions to make the system work better.

HB 2974 will encourage expensive unnecessary bridge and roadway projects across the state's best farmland. Over the last 20 years, proposals have been made for new Willamette bridges at five different locations (north of Albany, north and south of Salem, at the Wheatland Ferry and south of Newberg). New bridges at any of these locations would cost hundreds of millions of dollars that we don't have and

would require construction of miles of new roadway across prime farmland to create new connections to I-5. The studies that have been done suggest none of these bridges would serve enough traffic to justify their cost or the damage they would do to our best farmland.

HB 2974 has not been properly vetted. HB 2974 would put in place a new agency and new taxes, yet this proposal has had essentially no public debate or review outside the introduction of this bill in this session. To the extent this idea has merit, it warrants much more careful evaluation to make sure that it is workable and effective, is well-coordinated with all of our other efforts and that it does not have unintended consequences.

HB 2974 does not adequately address our most important bridge and transportation issues: bridge maintenance, upgrading bridges to withstand the coming Cascadia earthquake, and developing a transportation system that reduces carbon emissions. While HB 2974 allows the proposed district to address bridge maintenance, nothing in HB 2974 assures that the district or new fees will adopt or focus on our "fix it first" priorities or help reduce carbon emissions. It's likely - and apparent based on statements of those that favor this bill - that the district will focus on building new bridges - rather than addressing these other much more important needs. A bill that fails to reflect these priorities is a step in the wrong direction.

Again, while there may be some merit in the idea behind HB 2974, much more work is needed to create a workable bill that contributes to - rather than confusing and complicating - Oregon's efforts to create a better transportation system. Please send this idea back to the drawing board for more work.

Sincerely,

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