



# MCKENZIE RIVER DISCOVERY CENTER

**TO: Joint Ways and Means Committee, April 22 Public Hearing**

**RE: McKenzie river Discovery Center and American Rescue Plan Act Funds request**

**FR: Wisteria Stuart, Executive Director, McKenzie River Discovery Center**

Dear Co-Chairs and Members -

**Senator Floyd Prozanski and Representative Nancy Nathanson have each put forward a request of \$6.5M and \$5M respectively in Rescue Plan Act funds for the McKenzie River Discovery Center. We greatly appreciate their confidence in our work and I believe that confidence is shared by the Lane county delegation. I encourage you to seriously consider their request on our behalf.**

My name is Wisteria Stuart and I am the Executive Director of the McKenzie River Discovery Center. I was not able to testify last night so am submitting this written testimony instead.

My first day on the job was Tuesday, September 8, the morning of the Holiday Farm Fire which claimed 471 homes and over 170,000 acres in the McKenzie River Valley. Thanks to Firefighters onsite, Old McKenzie Fish Hatchery Park, where we hold a 99-year lease with Lane County, survived and starting in October 2020, we were able to host the Vida Relief Center, providing food, water, essential supplies and information to recovering residents. As many of you know, the McKenzie River supplies drinking water for over 200,000 people in the greater Eugene area but what you may not know is that the McKenzie River makes up almost 30% of the water flowing under Portland Bridges and into the harbor during the summer months. Not only does the Holiday Farm Fire represent a degradation of natural resources, the fire came on the tail of 6 months of strict COVID quarantine, significantly affecting the rural economy of the region which relies heavily on recreational tourism. We have heard first hand from local residents, businesses, river guides and others who are sincerely worried about if and how their way of life will return from these two dramatic impacts to tourism, recreation and even basic needs such as housing, clean water, septic and connectivity.

Now building back from these two impacts, COVID and the Fire, the McKenzie River Discovery Center is hosting 'Wildfire Recovery Information Days' every Thursday from 10am-4pm, linking wildfire victims with county staff and local recovery organizations.

Fast forward to the future, since 2007 we've been working on a plan to build a destination museum which will be a gateway to the river, featuring immersive exhibits, iconic boats, public trails, and an ADA accessible trout fishing pond all aimed at attracting visitors both regionally and globally, and contributing to economic recovery from both COVID and the fire for the entire region. Exhibits will be rooted in

digital technology which can evolve through time, and be shared around the world - this will be the first project of its kind in Oregon and is informed by a comparison of nine environmental centers including the Oregon Coast Aquarium, Columbia River Maritime Museum, Bend High Desert Museum and OMSI in Portland. The Discovery Center's completion will see a projected 50,000 visitors annually (a 20% increase to pre-COVID/Fire visitors to the area).

To date we have raised \$2M of the \$18.5M for the *Discover the River. Inspire the Future!* capital campaign to build the Center. A funding decision for \$6.5M by the Oregon State Legislature will bring us to 40% funded, enhancing our ability to go out to private foundations and individual funders for the remaining dollars and stay on target for a grand opening in 2024. An investment in the McKenzie River Discovery Center is an investment in the social, economic and cultural recovery of the area, inspiring future stewards of this important resource and watershed for generations to come, and returning vitality and hope to a truly devastated community. Thank you for your consideration.

In highest regards,



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