

Joint Interim Committee on Transportation

Meeting Summary- Ontario area site tour, stakeholder roundtable

Wednesday, August 28th, 2024

Members Present: Sen. Gorsek, Co-Chair, Sen. Boquist, Co-Vice-Chair, Sen. Findley, Sen. Frederick; Rep. McLain, Co-Chair, Rep. Mannix, Rep. Reschke

Visiting Legislators Present: Rep. Owens, Rep. Tran

Members Excused: Sen. Woods; Rep. Boshart-Davis, Rep. Evans, Rep. Nathanson, Rep. Pham

Ontario Site Tour

The Committee assembled at Treasure Valley Community College and boarded an ODOT Point bus for a tour of transportation facilities and sites in and around Ontario. Members were welcomed by ODOT Director Kris Strickler, ODOT Region 5 Manager Ken Patterson, Malheur County Judge Dan Joyce, Ontario City Manager Dan Cummings, and ODOT Commerce and Compliance Division Administrator Carla Phelps.

Mr. Patterson emphasized that the remoteness and long travel distances in Eastern Oregon, plus the fact that the entire eastern half of the state is a snow zone during winter months, creates a unique set of challenges for road managers. The tour traversed city streets that were once part of the state highway system prior to jurisdictional transfer. Comparisons were made between pavement conditions on the Oregon and Idaho sides of the state line. Maintenance costs are an issue, with ODOT taking responsibility for overpass maintenance due to high costs. Another cost to both state and local government will be ADA-compliant pedestrian ramps. Landscaping and vegetation management is also a cost issue. Traffic volumes in the Ontario area often are affected by a large number of Idaho residents traveling to the city to avoid Idaho sales tax, which imposes costs to the system without commensurate funding. The panel also discussed the cost associated with urban camping and homelessness, including a recent \$400,000 cleanup following a related fire. Finally, maintenance needs and cost drivers sometimes result in using asphalt patching on concrete roads, which was compared to patching a bad roof on a house.

Judge Joyce also spoke to the importance to local governments of sharing of State Highway Fund revenues. He emphasized that maintaining 1,200 miles of road, some paved and some unpaved, with 13 staff is a challenge, even with partnerships with the federal Bureau of Land Management to ensure rapid response. Mr. Patterson noted that much of the damage caused to roads by crashes, such as guardrail and cable barrier damage, cannot be assessed to responsible parties and must be paid by the local governments. Finally, the group discussed the impact of wildfires on the region when wildfire, smoke, or weather necessitates road closures.

Committee questions and comments for this portion of the tour included: whether pedestrian crossings on four-lane city streets have flashing signals; the average amount of time that asphalt patches on concrete highways last; whether the responsible party must pay to repair guardrails; whether there are insurance policies for highway infrastructure; the role of law enforcement in motor carrier enforcement; and where and when out-of-state insurance can be verified.

Farewell Bend Point of Entry

Carla Phelps, ODOT's Commerce and Compliance Division Administrator, provided an overview of commercial trucking regulation and compliance in the region, noting that the Farewell Bend facility provides port of entry for four counties. She noted some other geographic challenges, including that staff must drive long distances to get to work. The most common violations identified at the facility are credential violations. She estimated that about 270,000 trucks pass through the facility annually, of which 51 percent use the "greenlight" service that allows them to be weighed in motion. The scales were built in 1977. Staff on site also conduct several levels of truck inspections, ranging from tire condition to chassis and frame inspections.

The Committee debarked and toured the facility's truck inspection bay, where both random checks and specific checks are conducted. The primary goal is to ensure that trucks that are not in road condition are kept off the highways. The goal is to conduct inspections when drivers are out of service due to rest requirements. Inspections can also include driver reviews; one of the more common violations is exceeding hours of service.

Committee questions and comments for this portion of the tour included: the level of commercial truck insurance compliance; and penalties for being behind in compliance with weight-mile payments.

Winter Maintenance Strategies

Mr. Patterson acknowledged that snow is not as big a factor as on the Siskiyou Pass on Interstate 5, but the number of miles of road affected by snow present different challenges. The scale of the region requires shared equipment between state and local governments for road treatment and snow removal, and have also necessitated the use of "super trucks" that can perform multiple functions with fewer staff. He discussed the impact of closures on Interstate 5 between Pendleton and Ontario, as well as the effect that such closures can have on communities along the route.

Committee questions and comments for this portion of the tour included: whether snow fences are used to limit snow effects on highways; whether rock nets are used to prevent rock falls; whether ODOT staff in remote areas are provided with housing or a housing stipend; and methods of communication in areas with limited cellular service.

OR 201 North Slide Area

The tour passed through a region that has seen repeated landslides on the road to Weiser, Idaho. Annual budgets provide barely enough money to keep the road in operation; however, the cost of relocating the road to a more stable area would cost tens of millions of dollars. Mr. Patterson

noted areas where guardrails have settled to a level below the road bed due to landslides. The pace of slide damage varies based on the depth of the Snake River volume. Certain events result in the need for “all hands on deck” response, but options for addressing problems are limited. High costs for certain kinds of maintenance, such as landslides, has a negative effect on other types of maintenance, such as vegetation management.

Kim Curley, with Commute Options, provided a quick overview of public transit services in the region. Distances between cities provide a significant challenge for small populations. She noted that nearly one-third of Oregonians do not drive, and thus rely on transit and point-to-point transportation services for things like medical appointments, prison visits, etc. She also emphasized the importance of boosting active transportation. Brittany White of Malheur Express gave an overview of that organization’s operations, which include service to several Idaho communities.

Committee questions and comments for this portion of the tour included: whether intercity service is provided commercially in the region; and whether there are facilities where abandoned vehicles can be recycled.

Roundtable Discussion with South East Area Commission on Transportation, Jurisdictional Leaders, Business Representatives, and Topic Area Experts

Committee members and visiting legislators were joined by a number of participants and observers for a roundtable discussion of goals, possible funding strategies, and challenges moving forwards. Welcoming remarks were provided by ODOT Director Kris Strickler, Oregon Transportation Commission Chair Julie Brown, and Oregon Transportation Commissioner Jeff Baker.

Other participants at the roundtable included: Shane Alderson, Baker County; Paul Andrerres, Union County Commissioner; Elaine Clegg, Valley Regional Transit; Dan Cummings, City of Ontario; Kim Curley, Commute Options; Patty Dorrah, Harney County; Rob Frank, Harney County; Dan Joyce, Malheur County Judge; Matt Krabacher, AORTA; Jim Mendiola, Malheur County Commissioner; Shawna Patterson, Treasure Valley Reload Center; Nolan Perkins, Baker County; Andy Perry, Snderson Perry Engineering; Taylor Rembowski, Malheur County Economic Development; Josh Smith, HP Civil, Inc.; Connie Tanaka, Malheur County Veteran Service Officer; David Tiffany, Malheur County; and Brittany White, Malheur Express.

In addition to participants, others present at the roundtable included: Lindsay Baker, ODOT; Jeff Berry, ODOT District 14; Kevin Bottger, IronWorkers’ Union; Mike Castro-Schrader, Ontario resident; Brian Lemke, Carpenters’ Union; Tanner Lloyd, Associated General Contractors; Tim Martinez, GeoToll; Jim McCauley, League of Oregon Cities; Ken Patterson, ODOT Region 5 Manager; Carla Phelps, ODOT; Amy Ramsdell, ODOT; Betsy Roberts, Jacobs Engineering; Patrick Sieng, Oregon Transit Association; Sierra Watson, staff for Sen. Findley; and Brian Worley, Association of Oregon Counties.

Topics of Discussion

- Stakeholders invited to share “top of mind” issue for transportation work/package;
- Stakeholders invited to share one item that is a regional challenge;
- Stakeholders invited to share examples of factors that cannot be controlled that affect transportation in their area, and;
- Stakeholders invited to share ideas for diverse, stable and sufficient transportation funding sources.

Major themes that were raised during the roundtable include:

- Restoring passenger rail service to Eastern Oregon;
- Concern that weight/mile taxes will be going up, increasing cost to trucking companies;
- Reduced funding for winter maintenance will make winter driving more dangerous;
- Highs and lows of the budget cycle make it difficult to maintain consistent workforce;
- Need to index transportation funding to inflation;
- Maintaining roads that have shared responsibility between ODOT and local government;
- Need for more robust transit system;
- Challenges of maintaining roads over large geographic area;
- Need to try to find ways to stretch transportation funding;
- Health and safety concerns for road users and road workers;
- Concern for ability of veterans and disabled persons to get to appointments;
- Need for equity for low-income Oregonians;
- Need for better traffic enforcement to deal with unsafe drivers;
- Need to maintain the 50/30/20 revenue split with local governments;
- Major impact of weather, fires, and climate change on road system;
- Impact of economic downturns on stable road funding and services;
- Impact of high costs on taxpayers;
- Cost of deferred maintenance and degrading infrastructure;
- Effect of impaired, drunk and inattentive drivers on road safety;
- Long-term bonding for transportation projects has reduced funding stream;
- Allow use of county general fund allocations for transportation purposes;
- Find ways to provide more assistance to low-population cities and counties;
- Consider imposition of delivery fees;
- Cut red tape and regulations where possible;
- Need to charge electric vehicles their fair share to use the road system;
- Transition to a vehicle miles traveled tax;
- Use tolls to fund major transportation projects;
- Expand the payroll tax to provide additional transit funding;
- Use parking fees and fines to fund passenger rail;
- Need to address disparities in the Highway Cost Allocation Study;

- Multimodal freight movement – airports, ports, and railroads;
- Need to support local solutions for transportation funding; and;
- Take a closer look at project costs, including project labor agreements.