

## **Joint Interim Committee on Transportation**

### **Meeting Summary- The Dalles area site tour, stakeholder roundtable**

**Friday, September 13<sup>th</sup>, 2024**

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

**Visiting Legislators Present: Sen. Bonham; Rep. Helfrich, Rep. Tran**

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

### **The Dalles Site Tour**

The Committee assembled at the The Dalles Civic Center and boarded a bus for a tour of transportation facilities and sites in and around The Dalles. Members were welcomed by ODOT Director Kris Strickler and ODOT Region 4 Manager Tiffany Johnson.

Director Strickler provided opening remarks regarding systemic funding challenges, adding that local government partners are experiencing similar challenges. He acknowledged that legislatively-provided stopgap funding, while appreciated and helpful, does not solve the problem. Tiffany Johnson, ODOT Region 4 manager, provided introductions for local government partners on the tour and provided brief comments on difficulties in keeping Interstate 84 clean and free of vegetation due to reductions in maintenance crews in recent years. David Mills, The Dalles transportation manager, noted that The Dalles contains 166 lane miles of road, which it manages on a \$2 million budget.

### ***West 6<sup>th</sup> Street Stop***

The Committee debarked at the BiMart parking lot on 6<sup>th</sup> street to get a look at a recently approved project to construct a “chicane” (purposefully curved road) for improved safety. The project cost approximately \$4 million, of which \$922,000 was funded by an ARTS grant from ODOT. The project is expected to go to construction in Spring 2025.

Scott Peters, ODOT District 9 Maintenance Manager, provided an overview of operations to control noxious weeds and other vegetation growing in the right of way. He noted that the road shoulders include many areas that are too steep to mow, which requires chemical weed control to address puncture vine and Russian thistle, both of which can infiltrate guardrails and cable barriers. There is also a need to address hazard trees that can fall on roads during storms and other weather events. Some of these operations require contractors, which adds to the cost.

Mr. Mills noted that there is currently no dedicated litter removal budget. He then spoke to the issue that trucks are forced to park when there is a closure of Interstate 84. As the largest city in the area, The Dalles may have as many as 600 trucks forced to park during storm closures, while

there is only space for about 300, adding that the available space is actually parking on city streets. As a result, a minimum of five staff is required to coordinate truck parking during such events.

Committee questions and comments for this portion of the tour included: whether there are plans to address the lack of connectors to Interstate 84; whether there is an opportunity to merge bridge maintenance and weed control crews; and whether the nearby bicycle lane is considered dangerous.

### *Transit in the Region*

There is a significant need for coordination between local transit providers to allow for intercity connections. Certain providers have been forced to consolidate when one ceases operation. The Link Transit, operated by Mid-Columbia Economic Development District, operates shuttles between The Dalles and Hood River five times daily on weekdays. Transit providers also coordinate with their counterparts on the Washington side of the river.

Amy Schappe, Columbia River Transit, provided additional detail on intercity service between The Dalles, Hood River, Cascade Locks and Multnomah Falls. She noted that much of the intercity service relies on discretionary funding, adding that they continue to work toward sustainable funding for those services. Transit is a critical service for both residents and visitors, providing airport service, for example.

### *Seven-Mile Road and Historic Columbia River Highway*

Tiffany Johnson, ODOT Region 4 Manager, began a discussion of challenges in maintaining the many miles of rural roads in the region. Arthur Smith, Wasco County Public Works, noted that there are 660 miles of county roads in the area, as well as 85 bridges, all managed on a \$3.5 million budget with limited staff and no funds available for enhancement projects. He noted that about 75 percent of the county's road budget comes directly from the State Highway Fund via formula distribution. The bus traveled along what was originally The Dalles-Mosier Wagon Road, first utilized in the 1860s; today it is structurally deficient, but because it is an historic highway the options for upgrades are limited. The road is an alternate route used when I-84 is closed.

A number of low-volume roads on the county system are in similar situations with regard to maintenance and upkeep. A little less than half of the 660 road miles in the county are gravel roads. The Seven-Mile Hill road eventually transitions into a state road. Rising materials and labor costs make even chip seal treatment to the roads harder to effectuate. The historic highway portion near Mosier was last repaved completely in 1996. Farming in the area makes weed control problematic due to proximity to crops that might be affected by chemical control methods.

Committee questions and comments for this portion of the tour included: how many of the 85 bridges are weight limited; and how many incorporated cities and unincorporated populated areas are in the region.

#### *Memaloose State Park and Highway Rock Falls*

Ms. Johnson gave a quick overview of some of the unique challenges to winter maintenance in the Gorge area, specifically rock falls and shadows cast by nearby cliffs that cause frost and snow to persist. She noted that a little more than a quarter of traffic in the I-84 corridor is truck traffic, and that chain enforcement and compliance is sometimes a problem.

The Committee deboarded the bus at Memaloose State Park and Rest Area for a demonstration and discussion of the dangers of the geology and rock falls on Interstate 84. The nearby Rowena bluffs are considered the most unstable rock fall area in the state, and it borders the most important east-west transportation route in the state. The bluffs range from between 100 to 600 feet tall, and regularly shed rocks ranging in size from softballs to automobiles. Wire covers and catch basins are the primary method for preventing such rocks from making impact with the roadway, but such impacts do occur. One incidence was recounted where a motorcyclist was hit and killed by shrapnel from a falling rock that was only about the size of a shoe box. The scenic designation limits ODOT's options for addressing the rock issue.

The Committee also heard testimony from ODOT road worker Omar Perez, who was involved in an incident where his crew was responding to a truck crash that had resulted in a truck ending up in the Columbia River. While responding to the incident, a second truck, operated by a driver who was distracted by a hand-held device, nearly hit Omar and his crewmates; the truck instead impacted their response vehicle, resulting in the second truck also ending up in the Columbia River.

Committee questions and comments for this portion of the tour included: how many automobiles have been struck by falling rocks in the area.

#### Roundtable Discussion with Lower John Day 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 Vice-Chair Lee Beyer, and Oregon Transportation Commissioner Jeff Baker.

Other participants at the roundtable included: Arthur Babitz, Hood River/White Salmon Bridge Authority; Jayme Bennett, City of Mosier; Jeremiah Blue, Port of Cascade Locks; Kristi Chapman, Port of Hood River; Joe Dabulskis, Sherman County Judge; Jenifer Euwer, Hood River County; Kevin Gorman, Friends of the Columbia Gorge; Kevin Greenwood, Port of Hood

River; Alex Hattenhauer, Hattenhauer Distributing; Marla Keethler, White Salmon; Dewey Kennedy, Gilliam County; Jessica Metta, Mid-Columbia Economic Development District; Ray Moody, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs; Will Norris, City of Hood River; Cris Patnode, Gilliam County Judge; Rob Patterson, Port of Cascade Locks; Grant Polson, City of Hood River; Megan Ramey, Hood River County School District; Amy Schlappi, Hood River County Transportation District; Mike Shannon, Hood River/White Salmon Bridge Project Director; Arthur Smith, Wasco County; Raymond Tsumpti, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs; Cori Weissner, Hood River County; and Allison Williams, Hood River County.

In addition to participants, others present at the roundtable included: Lindsay Baker, ODOT Assistant Director; Aziza Cooper-Hovland, Columbia Gorge News; Kim Curley, Commute Options; Abigail Elder, City of Hood River; Mark Gibson, Oregon Trucking Associations; Sarah Iannarone, The Street Trust; Joely Jaeger, Gilliam County; Tiffany Johnson, ODOT Region 4 Manager; Tanner Lloyd, Associated General Contractors; Dan Mahr, Mahr Strategies; Michael Mason, Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs; David Mills, City of The Dalles; Scott Peters, ODOT; Amy Ramsdell, ODOT; Dan Shanahan, ODOT; Nate Stice, Regional Solutions; Kali Sullivan, ODOT; Cassie Wilson, 1000 Friends of Oregon; 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:*

- Need to ensure that the elderly and disabled have transportation assistance services;
- Importance of providing highway maintenance, especially to Historic Columbia River Highway;
- Need additional resources for bridge maintenance, bridge studies, bridge replacement;
- Importance of maintaining ability to adequately respond to emergencies;
- Need to keep goods and people safely and efficiently moving;
- Maintain state and local funding partnership 50/30/20 distribution formula;
- Road safety is of primary importance;
- Do not build new road infrastructure unless there is a plan to fund its maintenance;
- Maintenance projects do not get the attention they deserve, given their importance;
- Tap large companies that are heavy users of the road system;
- Replace discretionary funding with sustainable and ongoing funding streams;
- Importance of multimodal transportation for both people and freight;
- Rural areas have needs for bicycle and pedestrian facilities;

- Include tribal governments in decision-making that affects them;
- Find funding to effectuate jurisdictional transfers of roads to the correct government;
- Importance of land use and housing on transportation planning;
- Environmental permitting processes are overly expensive and burdensome;
- Need to mitigate and plan for environmental and climate change;
- Cannot predict natural disasters or storms, but must prepare for them;
- Funding must keep pace with maintenance needs of aging infrastructure;
- Need to remember that “one-size-fits-all” solutions don’t work everywhere;
- Impact of tourism on local transportation systems without commensurate funding;
- There will be more non-drivers as the Baby Boom generation continues to get older;
- Difficult to find qualified personnel to fill even funded positions in many jurisdictions;
- Many economic forces outside of our control – inflation, interest rates, labor costs;
- Consider implementing a vehicle-miles-traveled tax to fund roads equitably;
- Consider Congressman Blumenauer’s concept of a “transportation management authority”;
- Increase the employee payroll tax to raise more money for public transportation;
- Need for increased funding for intercity transit connections;
- Consider alternatives to truck weight-mile tax
- Ensure that all vehicles, including electric vehicles, pay their fair share to use roads;
- Consider reclaiming federal lands to help generate income from them again;
- Allow all counties to institute vehicle licensing and registration fees;
- Creation of the bi-state bridge authority for Hood River-White Salmon Bridge; and;
- Increase funding for the Connect Oregon program.