

## HCR 20 -3 STAFF MEASURE SUMMARY

### House Committee On Rules

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**Prepared By:** Melissa Leoni, LPRO Analyst

**Meeting Dates:** 3/30, 4/20

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#### **WHAT THE MEASURE DOES:**

Commemorates 150th anniversary of opening of Willamette Falls Locks.

#### **ISSUES DISCUSSED:**

- Cost to build Willamette Falls Locks in 1870s
- Work of Willamette Falls Locks Commission and the future of the locks
- Celebration of 150th anniversary in January 2023

#### **EFFECT OF AMENDMENT:**

-3 Revises whereas clauses to remove reference to Portland General Electric and change "Watkins" to "Wilkins."

*FISCAL: No fiscal impact*

*REVENUE: No revenue impact*

#### **BACKGROUND:**

The historic Willamette Falls Locks, located on the west bank of the Willamette River in West Linn, were built in the early 1870s by the Willamette Falls Canal and Locks Company to move river traffic around the 40-foot-high horseshoe-shaped basalt ridge between Oregon City and West Linn. Hundreds of engineers, laborers, and stonemasons, under the guidance of chief superintendent Captain Isaac W. Smith, chief engineer E.G. Tilton and engineering assistant J.A. Lessourd, worked day and night to ensure the successful on-time completion of the project that was so vital to the economy of the region.

The locks were opened to the public on January 1, 1873, prompting the biggest public celebration in Oregon since it achieved statehood 14 years prior. The first vessel to travel through the locks was the steamer Maria Wilkins, which entered the first lock at 12:17 p.m. on New Year's Day, 1873, to the elation of spectators lined up along the walls of the locks.

The locks were the first significant navigational improvement in the United States west of the Rockies, a crucial avenue for transportation of goods throughout the region prior to the construction of the Willamette Falls Railway in 1893, and a boon for the economy of the State of Oregon.

In 1890, a devastating flood tore through the Willamette Falls, causing serious damage to the locks, flooding the canal with debris and destroying two lock gates, as well as the home of lock tender Jack Chambers. In 1899, after a decade of ever worsening structural damage had caused the locks to fall into disrepair and disuse, the United States Army Corps of Engineers began examining the feasibility of purchasing the locks from then-owner Portland Railway Light and Power Company in order to restore the locks to their former glory.

In 1912, the War Department approved the \$375,000 purchase of the locks, which was completed in 1915. The corps' reconstruction of the canal and locks began in April 1916 under the supervision of Major H.C. Jewett and assistant engineer E.B. Thomson and was completed on September 1, 1917.

The locks were placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974 and designated as an Oregon Historic Civil Engineering Landmark by the American Society of Civil Engineers in 1991, honoring their critical role in Oregon history. In December 2011, after decades in and out of service, the locks were closed, with excessive

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deterioration leading the corps to reclassify them as nonoperational out of concern for public safety.

Following their reclassification, a groundswell of support for the locks, which included backing by the Clackamas County Board of Commissioners, the Willamette Falls Heritage Foundation, the Willamette Falls and Landings Heritage Area Coalition, Portland General Electric, local politicians, community leaders, citizens, the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians, led Oregon's Eighty-first Legislative Assembly in 2021 to establish the Willamette Falls Locks Authority, halting the corps' plans to permanently close and dismantle the locks.

In June 2022, the Willamette Falls Locks Commission completed an agreement transferring ownership of the locks from the corps to the authority, signaling the beginning of a vibrant new chapter in the story of the historic, long-enduring waterway. January 1, 2023, marked the 150th anniversary of the locks' opening, and they have never been in a better position to be preserved for generations of Oregonians to come.

House Concurrent Resolution 20 commemorates the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of Willamette Falls Locks.