

Submitter: Kelly Simmelink
On Behalf Of: Jefferson County
Committee: Joint Interim Committee On Transportation
Funding
Measure, Appointment or Topic: LC 2

Opposition to LC2

Co-Chairs, Vice Chairs, and Members of the Joint Committee on Transportation Funding,

My name is Kelly Simmelink, Jefferson County Commissioner. Counties and cities collectively receive 50% of State Highway Funds, so I recognize the importance of stable, long-term funding. However, I cannot ignore the overwhelming sentiment of my constituents: they cannot withstand additional taxes and fees. In Jefferson County, residents understand that we stretch every dollar to maintain our 596 miles of road. What they do not understand is why, despite their tax contributions, they see diminished service and accountability from ODOT.

Consider this: ODOT has already laid off 11 of 12 workers in Wheeler County, and over 31% of recent layoffs came from Central and Eastern Oregon (Regions 4 & 5). Most of these positions were frontline, boots-on-the-ground workers—the very people responsible for maintaining and improving our roads. At the same time, we see Region 4 offices filled with empty cubicles and a lack of visible leadership. Constituents cannot reconcile increased taxes with reduced service. Neither can I.

If new fees or gas tax increases are truly unavoidable, then accountability measures for ODOT must be significantly stronger than what is currently written in LC2. Right now, Section 7(B) allows ODOT to make “revenue-neutral” adjustments only if the Legislature does not act within 120 days, and those changes must be repealed once the Legislature does act. That is not real accountability—it is legislative deferral.

When I dug deeper, I found the accountability provisions being offered:

A performance audit by the Secretary of State.

Governor retains authority to hire and fire the ODOT director.

A repurposed Continuous Improvement Advisory Committee to review project delivery.

Greater legislative oversight on scope, schedule, and budget of major projects.

Additional review when local scope elements are added without corresponding local investment.

With respect, these are not new or groundbreaking measures. They are functions government should already be performing. To call this accountability is inadequate. Oregonians deserve more than recycled promises.

The reality is this Legislature has the ability to do what Oregonians are asking: make ODOT live within its means. If accountability is built into this bill in a way that forces fiscal discipline, then every Oregonian—urban and rural alike—will benefit. But simply raising taxes without demanding real reform is not a fair or equitable solution.

As someone who has long advocated for the 50/30/20 funding split, I value stable highway funds. But my responsibility is also to represent the financial realities of my constituents, many of whom are struggling with high costs of living. They cannot absorb steep fee and tax increases—especially when their trust in ODOT has already been eroded.

Finally, I must address the suggestion that ODOT may not plow roads this winter or may allow extended closures of mountain passes. This is not just a rural problem. Oregon's economy depends on safe, reliable transportation corridors such as I-84, U.S. 97, and U.S. 26. These routes carry food, fuel, and goods to Portland and beyond. Failing to maintain them would not only jeopardize safety in my region but would disrupt supply chains for the entire state. That is not sound risk management—it is a manufactured crisis.

Every one of us in elected office answers to the public every two or four years. I urge you not to side with measures that raise taxes without addressing ODOT's accountability problem. To do so would only deepen the mistrust that already exists between ODOT and the people of Oregon.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Respectfully,
Kelly Simmelink
Jefferson County Commissioner