

ODOT: Speak up now about use of federal money

By **PETER WONG**
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SALEM — Oregon transportation officials want to hear from the public about how the state should spend more than \$400 million in flexible funds from the federal government over the next five years.

The \$400 million is part of the \$1.2 billion that Oregon will receive for transportation from the federal infrastructure bill, which President Joe Biden signed on Nov. 15. Oregon will get more money for other programs, such as water and sewer lines and broadband connections, that does not go through the Oregon Department of Transportation.

In fact, \$200 million of the \$1.2 billion for transportation will go to TriMet and other public transit agencies. Much of the rest is earmarked for specific work by ODOT, such as bridge repairs and charging stations for electric vehicles.

The Oregon Transportation Commission will offer four scenarios for public comment through Feb. 17, when it plans a two-hour seminar. Chairman Robert Van Brocklin of Portland said the panel isn't wedded to the numbers in any of them, but is likely to tailor its own plan after hearing from the public.



Dick Mason/The Observer, File

The new concrete lanes through Ladd Canyon are shown during construction of the project in the summer of 2020. Oregon transportation officials want to hear from the public about how the state should spend more than \$400 million in flexible funds from the federal government over the next five years.

"It's difficult to say there is one scenario I feel comfortable with," commission member Julie Brown, who is the general manager of the Rogue Valley Transportation District, said at a Jan. 20 meeting. "We have to weigh all of these things."

Even before the meeting, ODOT received public comments adding up to 300 pages on how to spend the federal money. The agency also interviewed 1,500 people in 2021 — it conducts these surveys every couple of years — about what they would like to

see from the transportation system.

Though the money would flow into three general categories, as described below, the commission would have to approve specific projects as soon as this spring. It plans a decision on the broad allocations on March 30.

Alternatives

- Scenario 1: About \$107 million would go into Fix-It, a list of maintenance projects for roads and bridges, and the rest evenly split between enhanced

state highways and two other programs. For Safe Routes to School, ODOT has received \$4 in requests for every \$1 in available money. A new program of Great Streets would improve state highways that also function as main streets in communities.

The aims of Fix-It are to maintain 85% of the state's 8,000 miles of highways at fair or better pavement condition and 78% of the 2,750 state highway bridges. Even with an infusion of new federal money, bridge conditions are projected to deter-

iorate because so many of them were built during the interstate highway era of the 1950s and 1960s and are past the 50-year mark.

- Scenario 2: About half would go into Safe Routes to School and Great Streets, as described above, and the rest evenly split between Fix-It projects and enhanced highways.

- Scenario 3: About half of the funds would go into enhanced highways — the current state money is scheduled to decline after 2024, seven years after the state's 2017 law funded the latest round of projects — and the rest evenly divided between Fix-It and the school and street programs.

- Scenario 4: Each of the three categories would get an equal share of \$214 million.

More details can be found on the slide presentation that the commission saw on Jan. 20: bendbulletin.us/odot

Plan for the rest

ODOT officials have proposed the rest of the flexible funds (\$198 million) for these programs:

- \$100 million for ODOT to carry out new access projects to comply with a 2017 settlement of a lawsuit under the Americans with Disabilities Act.

- \$40 million to help offset a projected shortfall in agency operations and

maintenance.

- \$40 million to enable Oregon to compete with other states for a share of \$100 billion that the U.S. Department of Transportation will award for other projects. Possible Oregon contenders are two projects on Interstate 5: Rose Quarter widening and partial capping and a new bridge over the Columbia River to connect Portland with Vancouver, Washington.

- \$15 million to help communities with planning for climate change, including the transportation planning rule that seeks to reduce the need for travel between home, work and other activities. The rule dates back to 1991, but was updated in 2012.

- \$3 million to boost business and the workforce required for construction projects.

"What you have learned is that there is a need for money all across the transportation system," said Travis Brouwer, an assistant ODOT director.

In the 2021 survey, large majorities gave priority (90% or better) to six of 13 points, in descending order: Maintain roads and bridges, improve safety, reduce traffic congestion, protect the environment, seismic improvements, provide transportation for seniors and people with disabilities.

State announces \$1.85 billion national settlement with student loan servicer

The Observer

SALEM — Oregon Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum on Thursday, Jan. 13, announced a \$1.85 billion settlement with 39 state Attorneys General with Navient, one of the nation's largest student loan servicers, that resolves

allegations of widespread unfair and deceptive student loan servicing practices and abuses. According to a press release, of the settlement, \$95 million will go directly toward restitution for students and \$1.71 billion in debt cancellation.

In Oregon, that means 5,488 federal loan bor-

rowers will receive \$1,462,937 in restitution and 864 borrowers will receive \$22,454,017 in private loan debt cancellation.

Borrowers who qualify for relief do not need to do anything to receive their restitution or cancellation. They will receive a notice from Navient directly, but

the press release advised borrowers to update or create their studentaid.gov account to ensure that the U.S. Department of Education has their current address. For more information, visit www.NavientAG-Settlement.com.

"We will never break the cycle of student debt,"

said Attorney General Rosenblum, "if we don't hold student loan servicers accountable."

During the last Oregon legislative session, Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum initiated and championed SB 485 or a "Student Loan Borrowers Bill of Rights." The

law would address many of the problems Oregon borrowers have experienced with student loan servicers, including navigating the complex refinancing options, and would create a student loan ombudsperson to help educate and counsel student loan borrowers.

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