

State's bridges continue to age, decay

More than half of Oregon's bridges built before 1970

By **PETER WONG**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — The latest report about bridge conditions on state highways offers bad and good news for Oregon motorists and truck drivers.

The bad news in the 2021 report released last month by the Oregon Department of Transportation: the total of state highway bridges not in "distressed" condition continued to drop, from 78.4% in 2020 to 78.2%, close to the ODOT target of 78%. The peak in the past decade was 79.5% in 2016.

The good news: ODOT is making progress in seismic reinforcement of state bridges, and work is scheduled to start later this year on the George Abernethy Bridge, built in 1970, which carries Interstate 205 across the Willamette River between West Linn and Oregon City. The work will eventually cover nine bridges in a seven-mile stretch of I-205 between Stafford Road and Highway 213 in Oregon City.

Time is working against state bridges, more than half of which were built before 1970, during the interstate highway era. A bridge has a normal lifespan of 50 years, although its usefulness can be extended.

Under a 2017 state transportation financing law, \$12 million is generated annually for bridge repairs, up from \$10 million in 2018. The recent federal infrastructure financing law, which President Joe Biden signed on Nov. 15, will yield a total of \$268 million more earmarked for bridge repairs over the next five or six years. The federal law also offers opportunities for states to seek competitive grants for bridge work.

Still, at the current rate of three bridges annually, it will take 900 years to replace the 2,750 bridges in the state system. ODOT estimates its bridge maintenance backlog at \$5 billion.

Robert Van Brocklin, of Portland, chairman of the Oregon Transportation Commission, said the new federal funding helps with bridges and other transportation needs — but it is not enough.

"We can make progress on many of our goals, but we cannot solve the vast majority of our funding problems with the money from this legislation," he said in a statement after a commission meeting Jan. 20. "We also need to pursue other revenue sources to produce sustainable transportation funding to invest in a reliable, diverse transportation system."

The bridge problem is not new. After state highway officials posted load limits on some bridges on Interstate 5 — Oregon's main north-south corridor — the 2003 Legislature approved a \$2.5-billion financing plan, \$1.6 billion of which went to fixing state and local bridges on key freight routes.

In addition to I-5 and I-84, Oregon's main east-west route, ODOT identified these highways as Fix-It priority routes a decade ago: U.S. Highway 97 through Central Oregon; U.S. Highway 20 between Bend and Burns, U.S. Highway 26 between Portland and the north coast, state Highway 18 from the Portland area to the coast; parts of U.S. Highway 101 on the coast, and state Highway 58 from south of Eugene to U.S. Highway 97.

Mystery bill fuels guessing game on Wyden future

By **GARY A. WARNER**
Oregon Capital Bureau

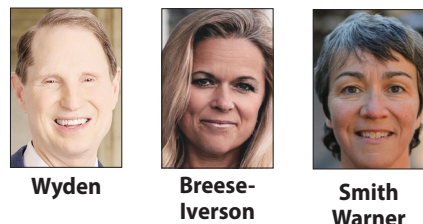
SALEM — A mystery proposal to change the way vacancies among Oregon's U.S. senators are filled surfaced over the weekend and set off a wave of speculation that Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, could opt out of his 2022 reelection bid or not serve his full six-year term if elected.

The questions about Wyden, 72, and the proposal intensified Tuesday, Feb. 1, when the proposal was on the agenda of the House Rules Committee in its first meeting after the beginning of the 2022 session.

It appeared on a short list of committee bills, a controversial form of submitting legislation without the name of the bill's author or who is requesting the action.

"Why are we doing this now?" asked House Minority Leader Vikki Breese Iverson, R-Prineville, who is vice-chair of the Rules panel.

Rep. Barbara Smith Warner, D-Portland, had little information about the gestation of the idea, other than it came to the committee as a request from a



Wyden Breese-Iverson Smith Warner

"Senator Wyden is running hard to win reelection to a full six-year term. He will serve a complete six-year term if reelected."

— **Hank Stern**, spokesman for Sen. Ron Wyden

source she didn't identify.

Oregon is one of five states where the departure or death of a sitting U.S. senator requires a special election to fill the seat, which remains vacant in the meantime.

The proposal would allow the governor to align the replacement of a U.S. Senator with the current system for replacing Oregon's executive officers. The governor names a replacement drawn from the same political party as

the person who had the seat.

An election to fill the unexpired portion of the officeholder's term is held at the next general election.

The proposed legislation that would allow the governor to choose an interim senator was circulated by bloggers and Twitter users, including the popular Oregon conservative website, Oregon Catalyst.

GOP activists speculated it could be a vehicle for a Democratic governor to replace Wyden if he either withdrew from the 2022 race prior to the general election or won reelection and didn't finish his new term.

Wyden spokesman Hank Stern said the Twitter-driven scenarios were "silly and uninformed."

"Senator Wyden is running hard to win reelection to a full six-year term," Stern said. "He will serve a complete six-year term if

reelected."

Stern said Wyden does not know where the proposal came from and has no role in its presentation or action to change the law.

After the House Rules Committee meeting on Feb. 1, the legislation remained in committee with no further action scheduled.

Wyden has \$10 million in his campaign fund, and declared his intent to run for reelection in a Federal Election Commission document filed at the beginning of 2021. He formally filed to run for the Senate on Jan. 26 when he filed a statement of candidacy with the Oregon Secretary of State.

Wyden challenged incumbent U.S. Rep. Bob Duncan, D-Portland, in the 1980 Democratic primary for the 3rd Congressional District. Wyden won and then defeated Republican Darrell Conger that November.

When U.S. Sen. Bob

Packwood, R-Oregon, resigned in 1995 amid a sexual harassment scandal, Wyden won a special election to fill the seat, the first vote in Oregon done entirely by mail ballot.

Wyden has been elected to four terms as senator. If he were to win election in 2022, he would serve until January 2029, when he would be 79.

Wyden has raised \$10 million since he was last reelected in 2016 and reported this month that he ended 2021 with \$7.2 million in the bank.

The totals dwarf all other challengers. The one Democrat and seven Republicans who have filed to run Wyden have raised \$168,000, combined.

The deadline to file to run for the U.S. Senate and several other federal and state offices in Oregon is March 8.

The primary for both parties is May 17.

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