

State panel: No new federal funds for highway enhancements

Commission advises ODOT to revise options

By **PETER WONG**

Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — The Oregon Transportation Commission has decided that the state's share of flexible funds from the federal government should not go toward new highway "enhancements."

The commission directed the staff of the Oregon Department of Transportation to revise its options. About \$400 million in transportation money from the federal infrastructure bill, which President Joe Biden signed on Nov. 15, will be divided among maintenance projects for roads and bridges, safe routes to school and improvements on state highways that function as main streets in communities.

The commission heard more comments at a meeting Thursday, March



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin, File

A vehicle drives down an empty section of Highway 97 near the Wilson Avenue overpass in Bend on Thursday, April 9, 2020.

10, after which members refined what had been four scenarios for spending \$214 million of the \$412 million in flexible funds.

"We are committed to preserving the existing transportation network and investing in a range of improvements to reduce congestion and harmful emissions, and to support improved safety, electric vehicles, transit and local improvements," commission Chairman Robert Van Brocklin said. "The proposed scenarios will

allow ODOT to invest in Oregon's transportation system in these and other important ways."

The commission will decide March 30 on the exact mix to be divided among the list of maintenance projects, known as Fix-It, plus safe routes to school and improved highways that function as main streets. It will decide on money afterward for specific projects within these categories; some projects will start this summer.

The \$400 million-plus

is part of Oregon's \$1.2 billion that will come to the Department of Transportation over the next five years.

This amount counts about \$800 million that the federal law earmarks for specific purposes, such as bridge repairs, charging stations for electric vehicles and programs to reduce greenhouse gases.

It excludes about \$200 million that larger metropolitan areas will get for transportation directly from the federal government.

It also excludes money for broadband, water and sewer line upgrades that will not go through ODOT. Transit agencies also will share \$200 million they will get directly.

Other uses

Other uses of the rest of the state's \$198 million in flexible funds, as proposed by ODOT staff in all scenarios, are:

- \$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, Wash-

ington. (The federal law has a separate fund for projects reconnecting communities, but it is just \$1 billion nationally.)

- \$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.

These numbers also could change as the commission makes its final decisions.

The amounts available to ODOT for new highway

enhancements will drop

off sharply after 2024,

seven years after the Legislature

approved its third major

funding plan in two decades

under House Bill 2017. The

plan increased fuel taxes, which

ODOT and local governments

spend on maintenance, and

raised some vehicle and

license fees to repay bonds

for construction.

Rep. Cliff Bentz compares Ukraine war to Cuban Missile Crisis

By **PAT CALDWELL**

Malheur Enterprise

ONTARIO — The Russian invasion of Ukraine is an emergency on par with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Oregon, said at the Ontario Area Chamber of Commerce luncheon Monday, March 14.

"It is a horribly difficult situation," Bentz told the large crowd at the luncheon.

While Bentz said "no one wants us to send soldiers to the Ukraine," the crisis showed that proper funding for the military is crucial.

"(The Ukraine crisis) should have alerted us to the fact we have to be prepared, we have to be ready," said Bentz.

He said he believes sanctions imposed by the U.S. and other nations are "having an impact."

"It is my hope they will work," said Bentz.

Bentz said mistakes were most likely made by the U.S. and NATO — the North American Treaty Organization — in the run-up to the Ukraine invasion.

"Holding out NATO where anyone could join

was probably a mistake," he said.

Bentz also discussed growing inflation in the U.S., which he said is triggered by a number

of different factors, including disruptions in the global supply chain.

"The supply situation is one that will take a while to fix," he said.

Bentz reminded the crowd he voted against President Joe Biden's massive \$1.9 trillion infrastructure bill last fall but said there were good things in the legislation, including money for mega

projects, such as a proposal to upgrade the port of Coos Bay.

Bentz recognized the price of fuel continues to climb but did not list the Ukraine invasion as the trigger for the higher costs.

Bentz said the Biden administration wants to convert the nation to cleaner fuels, including a push for Americans to buy electric cars. The problem, he said, is there isn't the infrastructure to build the cars nor are the prices of such vehicles at a reasonable level for the average American.

"People can't afford

them and we don't have a supply," said Bentz.

He said it can take up to 15 years to make such a profound shift. That's why, he said, a transition time line must be built into such a plan.

"The word transition was the one missing word in the Democrats' vocabulary," said Bentz.

Bentz also touched on the ongoing immigration issue on the border and water issues across the West and, in particular, in the Klamath Basin. The ongoing drought in the West is also an issue he is watching.

"Seventy million

people face drought," he said.

Bentz said he was pleased the River Democracy Act — a piece of legislation sponsored by U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon — was "headed off."

The legislation, introduced by Wyden and U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Oregon, last year, aims to protect nearly 4,700 miles of rivers and streams in Oregon as part of the national Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

"What Ron (Wyden) is trying to do is stop any activity on our forests. Why? I really don't know," said Bentz.

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