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## Kitzhaber sets March deadline to decide future of I-5 bridge

SALEM — Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber set a March 9 deadline for Oregon lawmakers to re-authorize the

state's financial commitment to replace the Interstate 5 bridge connecting Portland, Oregon and Vancouver, Washing-

ton over the Columbia River.

The Oregon Legislature is in a 35-day short session that began Feb. 3.

In addition to re-authorizing \$450 million to the project — better known as the Columbia River Crossing — Kitzhaber also wants the Legislature to adopt the necessary statutory changes to ensure appropriate tolling enforcement.

Moving the project forward also will require an executed intergovernmental agreement between the Washington Department of Transportation and the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) for bi-state construction.

In a letter to legislative leaders in Oregon, and to Washington Gov. Jay Inslee (D), Kitzhaber said that without decisive action by the Oregon Legislature (by March 9) and the State of Washington by March 15, he will direct the Oregon Department of Transportation to close the project.

"We'll try to roll this rock up the hill one more time," said John Mohlis, executive secretary of the Oregon State Building and Construction Trades Council, a staunch advocate of the bridge replacement project.

Union officials lobbied Oregon lawmakers to pass HB 2800 in the 2013 legislative session. The bill funded the state's portion of the \$3.5 billion project, which calls for improving highway interchanges, replacing the bridge and extending Portland's light-rail to Vancouver.

HB 2800 included a provision that required the Washington Legislature to contribute an equal \$450 million before any money could be authorized. Washington lawmakers failed to act on a transportation package last year that would have included the money. (Republican leaders in the Senate refused to move the transportation package to a vote.)

When that happened, Kitzhaber and Inslee declared the Columbia River Crossing dead.

A month later, Kitzhaber put forth a scaled down "Oregon-led project." The \$2.8 billion plan relies heavily on bridge tolls, but still includes an \$850 million grant from the federal government.

Over the last decade, Oregon and Washington have spent more than \$180 million on planning, designing and permitting for the replacement bridge. Substantial local and federal resources, and thousands of hours of public and community participation are also in-

vested in the project.

"For Oregon there is no alternative plan that is less complicated or less expensive," Mohlis said.

In his letter to legislative leaders, Kitzhaber wrote, "Although this is an Oregon-led project, it certainly is not an Oregon-only project. All of our project partners — TriMet, C-Tran, the City of Vancouver, the Washington State Department of Transportation, the Federal Transit Administration and the Federal Highway Administration — are still part of the Oregon-led project, some with modified responsibilities to reflect the state of Washington's postponed funding of the Washington interchanges.

"Importantly, our federal and local partners concur that the Oregon-led project continues to meet the safety and mobility benefits required in the federal Record of Decision, and they stand ready to move forward."

But support has been shaky, especially in the Oregon Senate, where Senate President Peter Courtney (D-Salem), is opposed. Courtney has repeatedly told the media that Oregon lawmakers did their job last year when they approved the \$450 million. He says Washington needs to step up and do its part.

"I've done my duty," Courtney told the Oregonian. "It's time for them (Washington) to do their duty."

Mohlis encourages union members to contact their state legislators and urge them to again support funding for the Columbia River Crossing.

"We're another 10 years away if we don't do this now," Mohlis said.



The Interstate Bridge seen from Vancouver, Washington, looking south toward Hayden Island in north Portland, Oregon, where Interstate 5 crosses the Columbia River. (Photo from Wikimedia Commons)

## ATU #757 not happy with TriMet audit

Leaders of Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU) Local 757 are unhappy with the results of a comprehensive audit of TriMet by the Oregon secretary of state.

The audit, released to the public Jan. 29, made 23 recommendations for change, from safety and scheduling to labor-management relations and unfunded liabilities. The audit was ordered by the Oregon Legislature last year after the Oregonian exposed secret pay raises for TriMet managers and shift scheduling practices that left bus drivers so sleep-deprived as to be potentially unsafe on the road.

Since then, TriMet general manager Neil McFarlane has promised more transparency, and a policy was worked out by union and management that requires at least 10 hours off between shifts for drivers.

The audit concluded that strained re-

lations between management and ATU, low morale and employee mistrust of management, are adversely affecting TriMet and its operations. Its recommendations include:

- A waste, fraud and abuse hotline for employees to report concerns;
- Formal meetings with the union outside of contract negotiations in order to repair a contentious relationship;
- Addressing the adequacy of bathroom facilities;
- Ensuring adequate time for operator breaks;
- Reducing the complexity and cost of bus operator signups;
- Allowing hiring of maintenance employees with prior training or experience;
- A formal evaluation process for all frontline employees that includes written constructive and positive feedback when warranted; and

• Following up with operators about whether their suggestions can be implemented.

"TriMet must work to improve a contentious labor-management relationship in order to solve its fiscal challenges and continue to provide critical services to Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas County residents," said Secretary of State Kate Brown in a press statement accompanying release of the audit report. Brown said TriMet's \$1.1 billion in health care and pension liabilities are its most significant challenge.

But Local 757 President Bruce Hansen, in a press statement responding to the audit, said he felt disheartened on reading the report. Union representatives met with the auditors and provided them a list of 25 concerns about

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