

JoCo's role in transit group in question

\$960 million state transportation bill leaves county in the slow lane

By **SCOTT JORGENSEN**
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Recent legislative passage of a massive statewide transportation bill has raised questions as to whether or not Josephine County is receiving its fair share of project funds.

House Bill 2001 has passed through the Oregon House and Senate, and is awaiting Gov. Kulongoski's signature. The \$960 million package contains funding for multiple transportation projects statewide, including Jackson County, but Josephine County will not see much of that.

Business As Usual
None of this comes as a surprise to Merlin resident Dick Smith. From 1999 until January, Smith was a member of the Rogue Valley Area Commission on Transportation (RVACT). That body consists of representatives from Jackson and Josephine counties. It makes decisions and recommendations regarding area transportation priorities. Smith said he resigned because, "I got tired of it."

"It wasn't getting anything done," Smith said. "I'm a person who gets on a board and wants to see results. I'm not just there to fill space."

Originally appointed to RVACT by the city of Grants Pass, Smith said that he was selected because of his experience serving as chairman of the county's Rural Planning Commission. He later represented Josephine County on RVACT as a private citizen, he said.

According to Smith, RVACT used to consult with a group consisting of planners and public works professionals. Smith said that group presented transportation priorities to RVACT and weighed them.

"Somewhere along the line, the professionals started to be ignored," he said.

The Oregon Dept. of Transportation (ODOT) started becoming involved in the process, Smith said, which changed everything.

Best Intentions At Start
Former Josephine County Commissioner Harold Haugen recalls having some issues with RVACT. Haugen served as commissioner from 1981 to 1989 and 1991 to 2005. He said that RVACT began as a "pilot project."

"The original intent of it was good," Haugen said. "The theory at the time, the goal, was to bring all the jurisdictions together in Josephine and Jackson counties and lay out what the plans were in the way of transportation so everybody had an idea what they were doing."

Originally, Haugen said, no formal votes were taken regarding the prioritization of projects, and RVACT was staffed by the Rogue Valley Council of Governments. But

the processes used by RVACT began to become more politicized, Haugen said, causing him to question if Josephine County was being duly represented by that body.

"Part of the problem I had was the way they wound up structured; we were giving up jurisdictional authority as a county to all these other people because we as a county could not go before the transportation board with projects," Haugen said. "We

'ODOT is basically the ones really running the show. They are really the controlling factor there. They are in control, want to stay in control and don't want to give up any control.'

- *Harold Haugen*

were basically giving up what we should never give up, which is our ability to make decisions as a jurisdiction."

Show Me The Money
Smith said that during his tenure with RVACT, a provision was inserted into the bylaws to ensure that Josephine County received at least 30 percent of the area's funding transportation.

But like Haugen, Smith said that all changed after ODOT became involved.

"Josephine County should be getting at least 30 percent of the money used for roads and projects, but we weren't getting it," Smith said. "It seemed like all the money was going to Medford and Jackson County."

The number of votes allotted for RVACT's members ensured that Jackson County always had many more votes than Josephine County, Haugen said.

"The citizens of Grants Pass and Josephine County are at the whim of the citizens of Jackson County and its various cities," he said. "Basically, they outvote Josephine County any time."

A Way Out Noted
Haugen said that he was bothered by the way that RVACT's structure forced jurisdictions to surrender their authority. As such, he began examining ways for Josephine County to withdraw from RVACT.

"I was pretty much the Lone Ranger trying to get us out of it," Haugen said. "Nobody was willing to listen to me at that point."

Smith said that he felt "ignored" on RVACT, and that Josephine County's transportation funding needs took a backseat to those of Jackson County.

"It was very evident we weren't going to get anything done," Smith said. "When they started taking the money away, it was Josephine County's money."

Priorities Outlined

As a Merlin resident, Smith said he has become quite familiar with the need for improvements to Interstate 5 exit 61, which he refers to as a "failing off-ramp." In fact, Smith said, he sees traffic back up to the freeway just about every morning.

He said that particular project was a \$750,000 fix 10 years ago, but now carries a price tag of more than \$7 million. Aside from that, Smith said, I-5 exits 55 and 58 also need improvements.

And a project to fix the "South Y" in Grants Pass — where state highways 199, 99 and 238 meet — suddenly fell apart. That was when Smith said he started losing interest in staying with RVACT.

Haugen said that the "South Y" project and the Merlin interchange were long ago identified as top transportation projects by Josephine County and the city of Grants Pass, along with construction of a fourth bridge across the Rogue River in Grants Pass.

"They were on a priority list of RVACT, but somehow got tossed off of there," Haugen said. "Somehow, those projects got bounced way out."

From Here to There
Neither Smith nor Haugen dispute that RVACT began with the absolute best of intentions. It was so successful, Haugen said, that it was used as a model for similar regional transportation groups throughout Oregon.

"The Legislature made it a law that there would be ACTs all throughout the state using RVACT as a poster child," said Haugen.

Smith states that RVACT "for a long time, was one of the best ACTs they had."

But the prevailing political winds have since shifted statewide. Haugen said that in those days, Josephine County had much more clout regarding such matters because the late Eugene "Debbs" Potts represented the area in the Legislature. Portland Democrats now dominate that body, Haugen said, further diminishing any sway once held by local representatives.

Perhaps most importantly, he added, ODOT has grown much more powerful during the past several years.

"ODOT is basically the ones really running the show. They are really the controlling factor there," Haugen said. "They are in control, want to stay in control and don't want to give up any control."

Equity Examined

Since being elected to the Legislature in November, 2006, District 3 Rep. Ron Maurer (R-Grants Pass) has made inquiries at the state level regarding the historic adequacy of Josephine County's transportation funding. At this point, Maurer has received no definitive answers, but said that the passage of HB 2001 should not be taken lightly by area officials and residents.

"I do think that out of this transportation package, with Jackson County getting \$170 million worth of projects, is going to embolden Josephine County to revisit RVACT," Maurer said. "Because, clearly, the funds, in my view, are certainly not equitable."

Haugen said that part of the problem may be the fact that Jackson County has "just done a better job as a county of pushing projects."

But there is some disagreement involving the ease with which Josephine County can simply pull its participation in RVACT. Haugen said he doubts that the county may be able to do so, and that walking away may actually hurt the county.

"No matter what, if Josephine County doesn't participate, then we lose," Haugen said.

Maurer said that decision is ultimately up to the local jurisdictions.

"It comes down to whether or not the local governing agencies want to continue being part of RVACT," he said. "They can vote themselves out of RVACT."

"It doesn't mean they're going to get more projects, but they're certainly not going to get fewer," Maurer concluded.



Evergreen Elementary School students who read at least 15 books during the school year were eligible to be entered in a drawing for a new bike in a 'Bikes For Books' program, sponsored by the AF&AM Masons of Kerby Belt Lodge #18. The presentation was made on Friday, June 5. (Above, from left) Masons Randy Kent, Max Holleman and Larry Stefanick with fourth-grader Sam Yost, second-graders Joshua Medina and Jeremy Johann, and first-grader Jill Luttrull. (Below, from left) Kent, Carl Jacobson, Holleman and Stefanick with fourth-grader Tristan Fiske and fifth-grader Kurt Hertler. (Photos by Chuck Thomas)



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