

TRANSPORTATION TOUR

A legislative committee came to Lane County July 20 to hear from ordinary Oregonians about their daily transportation needs. Whether you drive a car, ride the bus, bicycle, walk, use a mobility device, telecommute or a combination of the above, what's your story? What problems do you experience getting from place to place? What transportation investments would make it better?

The Oregon Legislature sent its Joint Interim Committee On Transportation Preservation and Modernization on a field trip to Eugene last week to meet with the Lane Area Commission on Transportation (LACT) and local businesses. In the evening, the committee held a legislative hearing with more than 100 people in attendance, more than a third of whom testified before the committee.

The 14-member joint legislative committee is touring the state, meeting with local business and political leaders who are developing regional transportation priorities. LACT, created by the 2009 Legislature, has approximately 30 voting members, including local elected officials and business leaders.

The committee, co-chaired by Springfield Sen. Lee Beyer, is in the middle of a 10-stop statewide field trip. LACT is chaired by Lane County Commissioner Sid Leiken.

The meeting began with a welcome from Oregon Transportation Commissioners David Lohman and Susan Morgan, followed by an afternoon LTD bus tour of local transportation resources ranging from the Eugene Amtrak Depot

to Mark Frohnmayer's Arcimoto electric vehicles, highway projects and the EmX, concluding with the public hearing at the UO.

Senate President Peter Courtney and House Speaker Tina Kotek promoted this tour after the Legislature's failure to come up with a statewide transportation funding plan during the 2015 regular session.

That failure led to the loss of some federal transportation money because Oregon did not provide the matching funds for these large infrastructure projects. The presiding officers recognized that the traditional approach — get the right folks in a room to hammer out a deal — did not work in 2015. Participants could be supportive of a package during the negotiation and then go out and criticize it in public.

With the current hard political divides, Democrats understand Republican fears that any Republicans supporting a transportation package including a tax increase would likely face a Tea Party conservative in the next primary. The media also objected to the "closed door" nature of those session meetings as legislators, lobbyists and the governor's office tried to hammer out a deal.

The tour has two goals. First, infrastructure and transportation projects are often contentious — e.g., the EmX, our bus rapid transit system — and it's important for the legislators to hear local discussion and disagreement. Clearly there is no consensus on these projects, even within regional commissions. Second, when the Legislature again tries to create a statewide transportation package in 2017, that plan will have to belong to everyone. Buy-in from local leaders, local businesses and local citizens is critical to its success.

The tour is a fact-finding mission. At this stage, the presiding officers are asking the committee to gauge need and support. The hope is the package will be large enough to meaningfully address the needs that are out there but also be within Oregonians' comfort level.

Kotek and Courtney did not want the committee to go in

with too many preconceived ideas. Gov. Kate Brown has her own ideas and team of advisors working on a 2017 transportation package, and while Brown is cooperating with the legislative leaders, she apparently doesn't plan on any concrete proposal prior to the November election.

Beyer described the public testimony he had received at the previous meetings in Marion County and Eastern Oregon as generally supportive of an increase in the gas tax.

"That's not really surprising," Beyer said. "After all, each town, or city or county has its transportation projects."

Beyer pointed out that several conservative county commissioners across the state indicated support for a gas tax increase, including Lane County's Jay Bozievich.

George Grier from Springfield, a longtime LACT and Lane County Farm Bureau member, spoke to the legislators of the need for a state transportation package that includes both rural and urban issues as we move ahead in a state with growing agricultural transportation challenges and a growing population.

Rob Zako of the nonprofit Better Eugene-Springfield Transit stressed two themes in his testimony: equity and accountability. He says his organization feels that all Lane County residents, regardless of age, income or physical ability, have a right to adequate options to access what our communities and state offer.

Currently in Lane County, many poor, disabled and elderly citizens struggle daily to get to work, school, grocery stores, medical appointments and other important locations around the area.

As to accountability, Zako argued that Oregonians don't like to write blank checks: "ODOT is too opaque and has skimmed by on too many boondoggles for Oregonians to be excited about a blanket gas tax increase. We need to reform ODOT to make the organization transparent in what is funded and what benefits Oregonians receive for such funding." ■

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