

Bridge: It serves about 7,200 drivers per day

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Meanwhile, cars heading north toward Washington and cresting the top of the main span got sudden, startling glimpses of oncoming cars in their lane.

There were no accidents or even near misses. At that particular spot in the bridge, few cars have reached the full 55 mph speed limit allowed. Cars in both lanes are climbing hills and this slows them down.

Still, what would be routine on any other road is immediately complex when it happens on the bridge.

Dangerous driving

With growing economic links between the Washington and Oregon coasts, a bridge that initially served only a few hundred drivers per day now carries an average of 7,200. While serious wrecks were quite unusual in the first decades of its existence, greater traffic volumes — especially in tourist season — have made for some memorably awful accidents in recent years. Last August, the bridge served about 9,800 vehicles per day, compared to about 5,500 in January.

Troopers from both states patrol the bridge, though it is rare to see them and even rarer to see them stop someone on the bridge itself.

“A lot of the time, you’re creating more of a hazard to try to stop people on the bridge,” said Lt. Andrew Merila of the Oregon State Police, who works out of an OSP office in Astoria. “We do make trips back and forth,” he said. But most of these happen at night. “During the day, even just to drive across and come back, a lot of times with heavy traffic you can’t do anything,” he said.

Astoria’s city limits stop in the middle of the shipping lane under the tall main span and OSP is the primary responding agency for issues on the bridge. The ambulance company Medix has contracts on both sides of the bridge. Still, Astoria police are often the first responders simply because they are already right there in downtown Astoria, whereas OSP troopers might be farther afield, patrolling U.S. Highway 30 toward Clatskanie or down on Highway 26 near Cannon Beach. The Washington State Patrol office is in Naselle, 12 miles away.

In the nearly 50 years since it was built and opened, Astoria police and OSP troopers alike have seen their fair share of problems on the bridge: terrible crashes between family cars and log trucks, rollovers, high-speed chases, fender benders, head-on collisions, stalled cars, and even, in recent years, a car that flipped over the guardrail on bridge’s the long, low middle stretch. No one was injured in that particular accident; the tide was out and the car landed safely on the shoal sands that are visible at low tide.

The 4.2-mile-long Astoria



File photo

This 2009 photo portrays some of the safety challenges of the Astoria Bridge. It has narrow shoulders and little margin for error when drivers follow too closely or wander from their lane. Increasing traffic volume, bad weather and impaired drivers are often factors in vehicular accidents on the bridge.

ria Bridge is narrow. It has only two lanes and hardly any shoulder. There’s not enough room for a patrol car to easily turn around and nowhere to go for cars about to collide. There are only waist-high sides and the Columbia River below.

It’s the reason why even minor crashes on the bridge tend to be so ugly. A crash that kills or injures people can close the entire structure down for hours. In the tourist-heavy summer months, an accident on the bridge can back up traffic through all of downtown Astoria and into Washington as well, whose jurisdiction starts about half-way across the bridge’s northern low-rise span over the river’s little-used north channel.

Last September, an accident that resulted in minor injuries closed the bridge for most of the afternoon as emergency responders checked for spilled fuel on the roadway. Drivers on the Washington side who arrived later and saw the un-moving line of cars stretching across the bridge, opted instead to wait at the Dismal Nitch rest area and watch events unfold through binoculars.

Policing the bridge

Though it is a dangerous bridge to cross, cyclists are allowed on the narrow shoulders and, during the summer, are often seen crossing on touring bikes weighted down with loaded saddle bags.

But try to cross the bridge on foot or park and step out of your car and any nearby police vehicle will respond immediately.

Like San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge, the Astoria Bridge has a history of suicide. In the last decade, a handful of people succeeded

in what they set out to do. The bridge’s massive main span arches over a deep shipping channel and people who fling themselves over the side are quickly swept out to sea. Days or weeks later, the bodies may wash up on nearby beaches.

On July 25, 2010, a tourist walking along the beach near Oregon’s South Jetty at Fort Stevens State Park saw a body in the surf. The Clatsop County medical examiner later identified it as the body of a 39-year-old Ocean Park, Wash., man who had jumped from the Astoria Bridge a week before.

High-speed pursuits are slightly more common, people weaving and speeding across the bridge trying to evade either Washington or Oregon law enforcement. Local police say they’ve encountered people who (mistakenly) think that if they are fleeing Oregon cops, they’ll be safe once they reach Washington and vice versa.

Wrong. But it is complicated.

An Oregon officer can witness a driver weaving back and forth across the bridge on the Oregon side, ignoring traffic rules and endangering other drivers. The Oregon officer can stop that driver in Washington and if the driver refuses to go back to Oregon, the officer can call in Washington officers to respond and arrest the driver. But, in that case, the driver risks facing charges in two different states.

“In my experience people want to go back to Oregon because they don’t want to get charged in both states,” Merila said.

In 2001, an Astoria police officer stopped a man for speeding on the bridge. The officer pulled the man over on the Washington side, ar-

rested him and brought him back to Oregon since the violation had technically happened in Oregon. Still, the driver’s lawyers would later successfully argue that the officer should have taken the driver to a Washington court for a hearing on the lawfulness of the arrest.

Then the case went to the Oregon Court of Appeals where the officer’s decision was upheld.

In an Oregonian article about the case, Clatsop County District Attorney Josh Marquis said, “It’s a very common problem here because there is no safe place to pull someone over, and the other side of the bridge is a very rural area that doesn’t always have an officer or state trooper nearby.”

Changing the bridge

After occasional terrible accidents, there is usually some grumbling in local communities about the width of the bridge or the speed limit on the bridge.

Neither will be changing anytime soon.

It would be prohibitively expensive to widen the bridge as well as a massive undertaking. The current renovation work alone on the bridge is expected to continue into 2021 and, as of last September, has already cost more than \$17 million.

“Speed limits we always monitor,” said Lou Torres with ODOT’s communication department in an interview in November. ODOT looks at what roughly 85 percent of drivers are doing and uses that number to help set speed limits.

For the bridge, “We have not seen a reason for having to change the speed limit at all,” he said. “Right now I think we have the right speed limit ... now if you’re going to lower the speed limit and enforce it, that’s a different story.”

County and city governments have not asked ODOT to reconsider the speed limit set on the bridge.

State seeks criminal investigation of Kitzhaber email leak

By **JONATHAN J. COOPER**
The Associated Press

SALEM — A state agency has asked the Oregon State Police to investigate the disclosure of some of former Gov. John Kitzhaber’s personal emails to a reporter.

Two workers from the state data center, which handles a wide variety of technology functions for most state agencies including the archival of emails, have also been placed on paid leave pending an internal investigation.

Michael Jordan, director of the Department of Administrative Services, requested the state police investigation last week after a story published in Willamette Week quoted from Kitzhaber’s private emails. They included emails between Kitzhaber and his fiancée, Cylvia Hayes, as well as between the then-governor and a lawyer representing him before the state ethics commission.

A spokesman for the agency, Matt Shelby, would not say why the two data center employees were placed on leave or whether it was related to the Willamette Week story.

Kitzhaber resigned last week following a series of reports about Hayes’ work for advocacy groups with an interest in Oregon public policy. He’s maintained the couple did nothing wrong.

Oregon law generally requires public disclosure of government records, but certain records considered private or confidential are exempt from release. In an email last week to staff at the data center, Jordan said the “clandestine disclosure” to Willamette Week occurred before the emails had been reviewed for confidential information.

Among the records quoted in Willamette Week was a memo to Kitzhaber titled “Cylvia Game Plan: Dec. 2013-Dec. 2018.” It outlined ways for her to take a more active role in Kitzhaber’s administration and position herself to “land lucrative work making big positive impacts at end of term.”

The newspaper also quoted emails outlining Kitzhaber’s legal strategy during an investigation by the Oregon Government Ethics Commission.

“Bottom line, this comes down to trust,” Jordan wrote in his email to data center employees. “Trust in our ability to securely store sensitive information; trust in our process to determine what information is public; trust that we can work with agencies to strike the appropriate balance between security and transparency. The recent breach has upset that balance. We’re working now to restore it.”

Kitzhaber used at least two private email accounts while he was governor. A Gmail account was used primarily for state business, an AT&T account for personal matters. Emails from both accounts were automatically archived on state servers.

Before he resigned, a representative for Kitzhaber asked that the emails from the AT&T account be removed from state servers. Technicians balked. Jordan said in his note to data center workers that “Kitzhaber’s emails have been secured in their entirety.”

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