

State lawmaker wants \$120 million in bonds for transportation projects

By HILLARY BORRUD
Capital Bureau

SALEM — A state lawmaker from Wilsonville wants Oregon to issue as much as \$120 million in bonds to pay for transportation projects starting this year.

State Rep. John Davis, R-Wilsonville, said he plans this month to introduce an interim bill to start tackling the state's backlog of highway, bridge and other transportation projects ahead of a larger transportation funding package that lawmakers could pass in 2017.

Oregon needs the money in order to compete for a share of the \$800 million in federal grants for freight projects, which will be available this year as a result of the transportation funding bill Congress passed in December, Davis said. He hopes to motivate other lawmakers and the governor to start working now on a larger state transportation funding bill they could pass next year.

"The (federal) funding starts immediately in 2016 for this," Davis said of the freight project grant program. "We're in a tenuous spot because Washington passed a transportation package, Idaho passed a transportation package, and California always has money ... That's a significant thing that's shifted since the (2015 legislative) session."

Waiting on list of projects

Davis said an example of a project that might qualify for a federal freight grant is the Oregon Department of Transportation plan to widen Interstate Highway 5 to three lanes through Portland's Rose

Quarter and improve highway ramps. He is waiting for the department to produce a list of eligible projects. Davis expects to unveil the bill by early to mid-January so that people can critique it and offer suggestions for improvement.

Any transportation funding bill faces long odds in the short legislative session, which starts in February. Gov. Kate Brown, Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, and House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, have all said it is unlikely they will pass a transportation bill this year. Davis could also run into opposition because his proposal would eliminate part of the state's low-carbon fuel program, although he is discussing the plan with environmental groups.

'Gang of Eight'

Davis was a member of the bipartisan group of state lawmakers that Brown dubbed the "Gang of Eight," who met secretly toward the end of the 2015 legislative session to negotiate a transportation funding package. The legislation lost support after the Department of Transportation revealed the plan would not achieve the promised reductions in greenhouse gas emissions, which was a sticking point for environmentalists because the deal would have repealed the state's low-carbon fuel standard. Republicans had refused to support any increase

in the state gas tax, a crucial funding source for transportation, while the fuel standard remained in place.

Modify low-carbon fuel standard

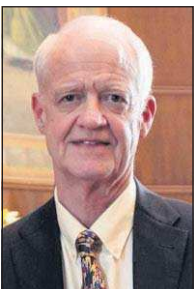
Davis' proposal would modify the low-carbon fuel standard, so that fuel producers and importers would only be required to reduce greenhouse gases by blending biofuels with lower carbon content into gasoline and diesel. Fuel companies would no longer have to purchase carbon credits generated by electric vehicle charging stations and other businesses in order to meet the fuel standard. The cost of the carbon credits fueled much of the opposition to the standard, Davis said.

The Oregon Environmental Commission voted in December to delay enforcement of the fuel standard until 2018, and commissioners said they wanted frequent updates on the supply and cost of alternative fuels and carbon credits.

Oregon's low-carbon fuel standard is supposed to reduce emissions from transportation fuels by 10 percent over a decade. So far, carbon credits sales under a similar program in California have increased the cost of gas by approximately 1 cent per gallon, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality Air Quality Planner Cory-Ann Wind told



Rep. John Davis



Sen. Peter Courtney

Brown fires employment department director

By HILLARY BORRUD
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Gov. Kate Brown fired the director of the Oregon Employment Department on Tuesday.

It was unclear Tuesday afternoon why Brown decided to remove director Lisa Nisenfeld, who had worked at the agency since then-Gov. John Kitzhaber appointed her in September 2013. The governor's spokespeople did not immediately respond to requests for comment. Nisenfeld also could not be reached for comment.

Last week, the Secretary of State's Office released an audit that found outdated computer systems at the Employment Department remained vulnerable more

than a year after a major data breach at the agency.

Kay Erickson, the state budget manager who works for the Department of Administrative Services, will take over as acting director of the Employment Department until the state hires Nisenfeld's replacement, according to a press release from the governor's office. Matt Shelby, a spokesman for the Department of Administrative Services, said it was his understanding Nisenfeld did not resign from the job but rather the governor wanted a "change in leadership."

Nisenfeld previously held jobs as president of the Columbia River Economic Development Council in Vancouver, Washington,

and as executive director of the Southwest Washington Workforce Development Council.

Brown's decision to remove Nisenfeld means there are now at least three state agencies without permanent directors at the helm. Brown's jobs and economic policy adviser, Vince Porter, has filled in as interim director of Business Oregon since Sean Robbins resigned his job as director of the agency in September to move back to Wisconsin to be closer to his family. Brown also appointed state chief operating officer, Clyde Saiki, as interim director of the Department of Human Services, while the state conducts a national search for a permanent director. Former

director Erinn Kelley-Siel resigned last summer, shortly before the Willamette Week newspaper reported on the Department of Human Service's failure to act on child neglect and financial mismanagement complaints against the Portland foster care program Give Us This Day.

Oregon Senate Minority Leader Ted Ferrioli, R-John Day, has called for the resignation of the director of a fourth state agency, the Department of Transportation, over doubts about key carbon emissions information during talks last year on a transportation funding package.

The Capital Bureau is a collaboration between EO Media Group and Pamplin Media Group.

Pacific warm-water 'blob' weakens, NOAA reports

By LAURA BERG
NW Fishletter/Energy NewsData

The mysterious warm-water "blob" in the Pacific Ocean has weakened a bit, scientists reported in mid-December.

Strong winds dominating the West Coast during much of November brought "cold air and some new upwelling of deep, cold water that weakened the warm patches that made up the blob," said Nathan Mantua of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Southwest Fisheries Science Center.

The blob's above-normal ocean water temperatures dropped to within 0.5-1.5 degrees Celsius above average. Scientists have hypothesized a link

between the unusual warm-water expanse and climate change or the California drought.

Temperatures in the Pacific are now lower than for most of the past two years, according to Mantua.

"The one main exception to the blob's decline is a narrow band of still-warm water along the coast from Southern California to San Francisco that remains about 3 degrees Celsius above normal for this time of year," he said.

"But the band may also be an early signal of the arrival of El Niño-related ocean currents, which are expected to cause more warming along the Pacific Coast in the next few months."

On another NOAA site, Climate.gov, blogger Emily Becker said in De-

cember that the 2015-2016 El Niño is likely to be among the three strongest since 1950.

"While the warmer-than-average ocean waters are likely reaching their peak about now, they will remain a huge source of warmth for the next several months to drive the main impacts on temperature and rain/snow over North America," she wrote.

"The main impact season is December-March, so we're just at the very beginning of finding out what this El Niño event will bring to the U.S.," according to Becker. "There's no doubt that El Niño 2015-2016, which has already shown its power around the world, will have a significant effect on the U.S. winter."

Trio of turtles treated at Oregon Coast Aquarium

EO Media Group

NEWPORT — A very mature 63-pound male olive ridley sea turtle, stranded just south of Long Beach, Washington, on Dec. 20, has died at the Oregon Coast Aquarium's animal rehabilitation facility.

A mature 82-pound female of the same species was rescued near Del Rey Beach, just north of Gearhart, on Dec. 21, according to a press release from the aquarium.

The pair of endangered rep-

tiles were transported to the aquarium for treatment. With body temperatures of just 52 degrees, far below the ideal of 75 degrees, the turtles were cold-shocked.

An initial assessment found the male had sustained a wound to his head and was hypothermic. His responsiveness continued to slow. Despite the aquarium staff's best efforts, he died on Dec. 23.

The female, now named Thunder, is showing progress and as of Dec. 29 was swim-

ming in a pool. Her body temperature had climbed to 70 degrees.

Another rescued sea turtle, named Lightning, continues to recover at the aquarium. She reached her ideal 75 degree body temperature on Dec. 23. The 48-pound turtle is now eating daily, and was spotted snoozing at the bottom of her pool — a sign that her own buoyancy issue is improving.

Despite Lightning's and Thunder's improvements, their prognosis remains guarded.

They will, at a minimum, require months of rehabilitation before they are healthy enough to be released in their warmer, native waters.

Olive ridley turtles from the coast of Mexico, where these turtles likely originated, are classified as endangered.

The Oregon Coast Aquarium and Seattle Aquarium are the only rehabilitation facilities in the Pacific Northwest authorized by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to provide the specialized care sea turtles require.

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