

Highway 30 in Oregon could be Veterans Memorial Highway

By Kevin Harden
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon's long stretch of U.S. Highway 30, from Astoria to the Idaho border, could become the Oregon Veterans Memorial Highway.

Senate Bill 790, introduced Feb. 24 by state Sen. Tim Knopp, a Bend Republican, would rename Oregon's 477-mile section of the national highway. On Wednesday, March 3, the bill was referred to the Senate Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness.

Retired U.S. Army Lt. Col. Dick Tobiason of the nonprofit Bend Heroes Foundation is the driving force behind SB 790. Tobiason, who served two tours during the Vietnam War as an Army aviator, and his one-man nonprofit operation led efforts on past legislation to rename eight Oregon highways to honor veterans. His legislative success rate is 100%.

"I've never lost a vote in 12 years doing these highways," Tobiason said.

It's simple math, he said. The Bend Heroes Foundation raises all the money needed to create 4-by-8-foot signs to be posted along the

highway with the veterans designation (probably more than \$10,000 for Highway 30). It pays Oregon's Department of Transportation to install them. Not a dime of taxpayer funds goes into the effort.

"Why would the Legislature disapprove of this?" Tobiason asked. "It doesn't cost them a cent."

There are nearly 100 signs honoring veterans installed on eight Oregon highways stretching more than 3,000 miles across the state. Each designated highway has between 10 and 18 signs, he said. That means drivers could see one veterans highway honor sign every 65 miles.

U.S. Highway 30 extends 3,073 miles to Boston on the East Coast. It is the only major highway in Oregon not designated to honor veterans. It crosses 11 states and is the nation's third longest coast-to-coast highway.

Oregon's section of the highway that winds along the Columbia River from the Astoria-Megler Bridge through Scappoose and Portland before heading east as part of Interstate 84, is the

Highway 30 in Baker County

Much of Highway 30 through Baker County was supplanted by the construction of Interstate 84 in the 1960s and 1970s.

But sections of the "old" highway remain, including the 19 miles between North Powder and Baker City, and a stretch from Baker City to Durkee, passing Pleasant Valley in between.

beginning of Tobiason's plans for the road. He's working with veterans groups and lawmakers in 10 other states to get the same designation all the way to Boston.

Tobiason's Bend Heroes Foundation has also asked Congress to designate the 3,365-mile U.S. Highway 20, which begins at Newport on the Oregon Coast and heads east to Boston, the National Medal of Honor Highway. Oregon's section of Highway 20 is already known as the

Medal of Honor Highway.

SB 790 is also kind of an ending for Tobiason. He has proposed similar bills since 2008 and testified 14 times in favor of legislation. When he's finished with the U.S. Highway 30 project, just about every major highway in the state will honor veterans or service men and women missing in action.

Between World War I (1914) and wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf (1990 and 2003), 6,000 Oregon soldiers, sailors (including Coast Guard), Marines, merchant seamen and airmen were killed. During that same time, about 15,000 Oregonians were wounded in combat and nearly 1,000 were prisoners. About 1,000 Oregonians remain missing in action from all of the conflicts.

Oregon highways Tobiason and the foundation have designated include:

- U.S. Highway 395, from California to Washington, is the World War I Veterans Memorial Highway.
- Interstate 5, from California to Washington, is known as the Korean War Veterans Memorial High-



EO Media Group/File

Although it is part of Interstate 84 for much of its route through Eastern Oregon, sections of Highway 30 remain.

way and the Purple Heart Trail.

- A section of I-5 from Albany to Salem is the Atomic Veterans Memorial Highway.
- U.S. Highway 101, from Washington to California, is the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq Veterans Memorial Highway.
- A section of U.S. Highway 26, from the Highway 101 intersection to Idaho, is the POW/MIA Memorial Highway

Tobiason is already planning his Eastern Oregon trip later this year when U.S. Highway 30 is officially designated the Oregon Veterans Memorial Highway. He's been to nearly every highway sign dedication ceremony, racking up more than 5,000 miles on his vehicle.

"We'll have a big ceremony in Ontario," Tobiason said. "We should have Idaho officials there, because their bill should be done about the same time."



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Steve West, who manages the Ponderosa Ranch near La Grande, pauses on March 4 in front of a thicket of trees that were cut over the winter. West says the goal was to thin the forest and make the area more welcoming for wildlife.

ROCK FIGHT

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The location of the quarry near Interstate 84 has to meet Oregon Department of Transportation's mandates for dust control. He said there would be plenty of water on site to manage dust and they could bring in water trucks as well.

"We are committed in our business plan to dust mitigation at the highest levels," West said.

The project is to expand the small, 15-acre quarry now at the site, he said, but expanding the pit to 250 acres will take a long time.

"It could be a hundred years before we get to the top of the hill," West said, when the quarry would be visible from Perry.

While people from La Grande won't be able to see it, drivers on I-84 would.

"But," West said, "it's not going to be as big an eyesore as people think."

He also said the project has some local support, and Union Pacific Railroad is willing to get on board.

The railroad in September 2019 sent West a letter stating it reviewed the request from Universal Exports Limited, the company out of Bozeman, Montana, seeking rail service for the pit. Union Pacific reported it was "pleased to notify you that we are looking forward to working with you on developing new rail service to this location."

Union Pacific also stated it was moving forward with track authorization based on the conceptual plan and as long as the project can meet certain requirements, including the design and installation of track and powered switches that meet UPRR standards.

Making improvements

West said this project for more than two years has spent "hundreds of thousands of dollars and hundreds of man hours" to make sure the quarry is done the right way.

That includes meeting the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's mitigation requirement to improve 250 acres of wilderness as an offset for the quarry. That mitigation, West said, is at the top of Mount Emily in what he described as "uber critical" elk habitat. The work has involved tree thinning and the installation of lay-down fencing, which is easy to erect to contain cattle that graze the area May 15 to Aug. 1.

"We use the cattle as a tool to prevent catastrophic wildfire," West said. "My intention is to do this project for the long-term betterment of the wildlife."

West said he even would be willing to take anyone up there to show them the work that has gone into mitigating the quarry proposal.

Laying it all out

The debate over the quarry had a public airing at the Union County Planning Commission's meeting Monday to consider approving the project. West said he planned to attend over the phone as will other supporters to plead for approval. The opposition also will get to make a case.

If the county decides to nix the deal, West and his side could appeal to the Oregon Land Use Board of Appeals. West said that would cost more money and require another attorney and could take years for a decision. In that scenario, West said, his side would take a hard look and see if the fight would be worth the cost.

SCHOOLS

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"Having background and understanding in these areas gives her a head start related to the topics Baker 5J strives to communicate with the public," Witty said. "McDowell also has experience working with international programs, and was intrigued to learn that Baker 5J aspires to develop better ties with the international school community," Witty said.

McDowell was based in Portland for several years before moving to Eastern Oregon, most currently living

in Union and working for Union County's Center for Human Development.

In that job she served on the incident management team where she helped in planning, developing and communicating the organization's COVID-19 response, the press release stated.

McDowell has two children, ages 3 and 5, who are enrolled in local preschool and kindergarten programs as they move to settle in Baker City. She says she has come to enjoy the more relaxed lifestyle Eastern Oregon has to offer a growing family.

"I look forward to working with the Baker 5J team to help provide the best future possible for all the children in this beautiful community," McDowell said.



McDowell

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