

Brown resurrects transportation panel

Some worry groups are working at cross purposes with funding plan

By Hillary Borrud
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Gov. Kate Brown has reactivated a panel originally created by former Gov. John Kitzhaber to develop a long-term plan to pay for transportation projects from highway and bridge construction, to improvements for pedestrians and bicyclists.

At least one of the panel's six subgroups met last week and another group met Tuesday. Meetings are open to the public.

Kitzhaber appointed the panel in December 2014, and it was supposed to deliver a report this year with its vision for the future of Oregon transportation. Kitzhaber asked the panel to assess current challenges, but also come up with a plan to pay for the transportation system it would like the state to have in 30 years. However, the panel stopped meeting after Kitzhaber resigned in February.

A bridge condition report released by the Oregon Department of Transportation on Thursday highlighted the challenge the panel faces in figuring out how to pay for just one aspect of the problem. Bridges should receive maintenance every 30 to 50 years, but the current state budget only allows for maintenance every 100 years, according to ODOT. At the current bridge replacement rate of three per year, state highway bridges would need to last an average of 900 years.

It's unclear how the panel's work fits in with the desire by lawmakers and Brown to raise money for the state's current transportation needs.

Kitzhaber had tasked the group with developing a long-term vision to meet the state's transportation needs, separate from efforts to raise money to pay for immediate needs. Brown and a group of eight lawmakers negotiated a deal during the legislative session that would have raised the state gas tax and vehicle registration fees to generate a total of \$202 million annually for state and local roads and repay \$400 million in bonds for specific highway projects listed in the bill.

However, the proposal foundered within 24 hours of its release after Oregon Department of Transportation director Matt Garrett said during a hearing that the plan would result in a smaller reduction in greenhouse gas emissions than the agency originally estimated: 20 percent of the amount originally calculated by the state. The revelation doomed the deal, which was conditional upon the repeal of Oregon's low-carbon fuel standard, because it appeared the carbon reduction from the transportation package would be less than Oregon is supposed to achieve through the fuel standard.

Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, is a member of the panel and said she wants to know how the group's work will tie in with work by Brown and the bipartisan group of lawmakers from the Oregon House and Sen-

ate known as the "Gang of Eight" earlier this year.

Johnson was also among the lawmakers who hammered out the deal in closed-door meetings with Brown and a couple other lawmakers from the group — Sen. Lee Beyer, D-Springfield, Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario and Rep. Caddy McKeown, D-Coos Bay — are also on the visioning panel.

Although the deal failed to move in the Legislature, Johnson said the group accomplished a lot and lawmakers who previously disagreed on contentious issues changed their minds.

"I certainly don't think that work product ought to be abandoned," Johnson said. "There was a sense of possibility."

Brown said in a statement in June that she wants that work to form the basis for future legislation to pay for highway, bridge and other transportation work.

"The bicameral, bipartisan working group I assembled earlier this session has provided excellent groundwork that will inform our future efforts," Brown said in a press release. "I will work with Republicans and Democrats to make it happen."

Brown has not said whether the transportation vision panel's work, which is supposed to be finished in March, will also inform near-term transportation funding efforts. The short, interim legislative session is scheduled to end the first week of March.

The governor did add a couple of new charges to the panel: find out how much the state would have to spend to prepare its transportation to be "resilient" during a Cascadia subduction zone earthquake, recommend ways to promote alternative transportation to address traffic congestion, recommend spend-



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ing levels and options to raise money for current and future transportation needs, and recommend how the state can "encourage and adequately prepare for key technological innovations that can fundamentally improve the state transportation system in the next 30 years."

Johnson said one example of this work was the "Gang of Eight's" proposal to "re-purpose" some money in the Oregon Department of Transportation budget and re-

quest a performance audit of the agency by the Secretary of State's Office.

Lawmakers questioned some of the agency's spending decisions, such as \$65,000 spent since 2003 to send a staffer to Washington, D.C., Brussels, Barcelona, Singapore and the Gold Coast of Australia to research alternatives to the gas tax, as reported in July by Willamette Week. The state paid for only part of the cost of the employee's more than

100 trips over a decade, the weekly newspaper reported; conference sponsors picked up the rest of the tab.

Johnson said ODOT officials did not like proposal by lawmakers and Brown to put the agency under a microscope and change its funding.

so Johnson is concerned that ODOT is now managing the transportation "visioning" project.

"This is being characterized as a continuation of the Kitzhaber effort, only there are big differences," Johnson said. "This one is being ODOT driven ... I guess the question I'd ask is, if it's all ODOT driven where do the new ideas have a chance to bubble forward?"

Travis Brouwer, assistant director of ODOT, said it is common for state agencies to provide expertise in the form of presentations to advisory committees.

"We've been asked by the governor's office to provide subject matter experts for all the groups" on the vision panel, Brouwer said. "But each group gets to determine its work plan and bring in people from any perspective."

Brouwer rejected the idea that ODOT might steer the panel away from proposals that the agency dislikes.

"It's certainly a group that has some heavy hitters, so I think they'll be able to define their agenda and what they want to propose," Brouwer said of the panel.

Peggy, Pepper and Karin White would like to express sincere thanks to all involved at the time of Jep O. White's death, especially the staff at the Blue Mountain Hospital and Hospice, Dr. Hall and many others who were there in our time of need.

Sincerely,
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We are writing to express our heartfelt gratitude for all those in our community who stepped up to help and support fire victims. There are so many to thank: the stranger who helped me settle my horses at the fairgrounds; Mike and Judi who evacuated our pickup and travel trailer; Mindy and Mary at the fairgrounds office; Linda who took in our duck; all those who delivered hay to the fairgrounds; friends who offered us their homes for us to stay in and Carl Reed who let us have his; friends who offered refuge for the horses; friends and family who came to help rebuild our bridge and our water system; our generous local businesses that donated supplies and offered discounts; all those from near and far who donated items to the relief center and Jennifer and Sherrie and all the awesome volunteers who worked there with such loving care; and the Mennonites from Burns and our Bear Valley friends who came to clean up the ruins. Our sincere thanks go out to you all.

Our community has been hit so hard, but the goodness and generosity of our folk has softened the blow for us. We all know this catastrophic fire did not have to happen. According to Gordon Graham, a frequent motivational risk management speaker to the USFS, "predictable is preventable." Because it wasn't, our beautiful canyon and mountains will never be the same.

Robert Reed and Judith Beaudet Reed