

Federal funds could help shore up structurally deficient bridges

By JADE MCDOWELL AND ALEX CASTLE
STAFF WRITERS

Billions of dollars in new federal funding for bridge repair could translate into benefits for Umatilla County.

Last week, Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, announced he and Sens. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, and Sheldon Whitehouse, D-Rhode Island, had secured \$3.25 billion for bridge repairs in a highway package that is expected to pass out of the Environment and Public Works Committee.

The Bridge Investment Act would create a federal grant program to assist states and local governments in replacing or repairing bridges in poor condition, on the condition they use American-made steel.

“All across Oregon, I hear concerns from Oregonians about our nation’s crumbling infrastructure,” Wyden said in a statement. “With over half of the bridges in Oregon being more than half a century old, our state is particularly vulnerable.”

According to a 2018 report by the Oregon Department of Transportation, ODOT’s District 12, which includes Umatilla and Morrow counties and small portions of Grant, Wheeler and Gilliam, contains two bridges that are in poor condition. One is the Interstate 82 Oregon-bound bridge over the Columbia River and the other is an Interstate 84 bridge over Meacham Creek just south of Meacham.

Construction to replace the deck and restore structural integrity to the I-82 bridge, built in 1955, was completed in June of this year by the Washington Department of Transportation, which split the cost of the project with Oregon.

Umatilla County public works director Tom Fellows said he’ll need to see more details of the proposed federal funding to know how it may impact the area’s bridges.

Fellows said there’s certainly a few in need of repair. While he awaits specific details, he expects any funding that is given to Oregon will go through the state’s bridge program.

In the program, counties submit bridges to the state, particularly larger ones, that drop below a 50% sufficiency rating. The state then divvies up its funding among the bridges on the list.

In 2014, ODOT released the Highways Seismic Plus Report, which stated a five-phase plan calling for \$5 billion to improving 718 bridges throughout Oregon, with an eye on making the state’s roads less likely to fail in the event of a major earthquake. Not a single bridge from Umatilla County was included in that plan.

The state legislature passed an ambitious plan in 2017 that put \$5.3 billion toward transportation projects, including bridge improvements. Still, a majority of state funds was dedicated to bridges in the west that are at greater risk of suffering damage from an earthquake.

Fellows is optimistic that this funding could change that.

“What is going to happen, I suspect, is that this money will go into the bridge program and the state’s cut line will move down, which may mean now one or two of the bridges is included,” he said.

In addition to the two bridges rated “poor,” 94 of District 12’s bridges are considered in fair condition, and the other 60 are considered in good condition. ODOT’s report only includes bridges on state highways and interstates.

Five of the district’s bridges will turn 100 in 2021: highway crossings over Hinton Creek, Willow Creek and Blackhorse Creek in Heppner and two bridges over Emigrant Hill Frontage Road outside of Meacham.

According to the Federal High-

way Administration, Oregon has 422 bridges considered “structurally deficient.” About half of them are city- and county-owned bridges in rural parts of the state. Six of the state’s structurally deficient bridges are on interstates. A 2018 report by the administration estimates that proposed bridge projects in Oregon currently add up to \$1.8 trillion in costs.

When reached for comment, ODOT spokesperson Katherine Benenati said it’s too early to say what the process will look like for how the federal funds could be distributed throughout the state and what impact, if any, it would have on projects in Eastern Oregon.

However, ODOT will gladly welcome the federal help.

“Any additional funding Congress can provide would be put to good use,” Benenati said.

Regardless of where the funding ends up, state Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, said the area’s bridges “are in desperate need of repair” and thinks the funding sends the right message of investing in infrastructure.

“Public sector investments lead to private sector investments,” Smith said. “These type of infrastructure projects make our area more acceptable to businesses while also making it more efficient and safer for our citizens.”

Along with potentially drawing private investments, Smith said the federal investment sets the stage for Oregon to double down on its commitment to infrastructure projects. He’ll be looking into whether the state can match any federal funding with state dollars.

The Bridge Investment Act will be part of a larger infrastructure package that could also include funding for roads, according to the news release sent out by Wyden. The bridge grants would allow entities “of all sizes and scope to apply for funding” including states, counties, cities, special districts, federal agencies and Indian tribes.



Staff photo by E.J. Harris, File

A wind tower blade is removed from a flatbed railcar from the railroad loop at the Port of Morrow in Boardman earlier this year.

Port of Morrow approved for Marine Highway Designation

By ALEX CASTLE
STAFF WRITER

Ryan Neal, Port of Morrow executive director.

The U.S. Department of Transportation’s Maritime Administration (MARAD) announced Friday it approved the Port of Morrow for a Marine Highway Designation, which enables the port to expand its barge service and makes it eligible to apply for federal funding.

The approval came after the port’s request that included bipartisan support from the state’s Democratic U.S. senators, Sen. Jeff Merkley and Sen. Ron Wyden, along with Rep. Greg Walden, R-Hood River. Of the 34 issued around the country, this is just the third such designation awarded to projects on the West Coast.

“We are incredibly thankful for the designation for MARAD and would like to thank Sen. Merkley, Sen. Wyden and Rep. Walden for all their support in helping secure this designation,” said

The port can now apply for funding from MARAD’s America’s Marine Highway Program (AMHP), which received \$7 million from Congress in the last fiscal year. Erica Lasater, Port of Morrow’s communications manager, said the port is looking into applying for a grant to open up terminal 1, which would increase the services taking place at the port.

With more projects that expand the port’s services possible with federal funding now available, the port and those that supported its designation are hoping it will create more jobs in the region.

“Oregon’s coastal and inland ports support local economies across our state by providing the kinds of great jobs that people can raise their families on, and by making it easier to transport goods to and from our communities and across the world,” Merkley said in a press release.

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