

Building bridges and future bridge engineers

Staff Reports

What do you get when you combine 2,000 gumdrops, 400 Saltine crackers and an endless supply of toothpicks? At a unique public involvement event at Ashland Middle School in Jackson County, the result was increased community awareness and involvement, and a memorable learning opportunity for more than 100 students.

On Nov. 14, ODOT teamed up with its contractors on the OTIA III State Bridge Delivery Program to solicit feedback from local residents at an open house for Bundle 301, Interstate 5: Eagle Mill Road – Neil Creek Road. Public involvement contractor Zetlin Strategic Communications and prime contractor HNTB Corp. reached out to the area's middle-school students with a bridge-building activity, complete with detailed plan sheets and three expert bridge engineers on hand to guide the way.

"My sixth graders built bridges under the direction of ODOT folks, and a bridge of partnership was built between our school and ODOT," said Bonnie McCracken, sixth grade teacher at Ashland Middle School. "We don't have the



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BLUEPRINTS AND A MODEL OF A GUMDROP BRIDGE, part of the Oregon Department of Transportation's efforts to educate kids and generate interest in transportation engineering.

expertise that they have; yet we teach the future engineers. [This experience] gave our students a glimpse into all that is involved in planning and constructing bridges."

The mock plan sheets instructed students to develop a structure called Rootbeer Creek Bridge on the little-known Candy Highway in Tummyache County with nothing more than crackers for bridge decks, gum-

drops as footings and toothpicks to hold it all together.

"ODOT is a great civic partner and, in that spirit, we felt this was a good way to enrich the community and get children—and, we hoped, their parents and teachers — engaged with the ODOT activity in their area," said Zetlin's Regional Director Lois Cohen. "The kids and the teachers adored it, and the teachers were even able to

weave in some language arts and math lessons."

With the assistance of Cohen and her associate Kate Bodane, the exercise was led by three engineers from HNTB, a national transportation infrastructure firm that offers design, engineering and planning services. Steve Litchfield, HNTB's project manager on Bundle 301, saw this as a great way to give back to the community and raise awareness.

"The kids were ecstatic, and we were able to work one-on-one with each of them," said Litchfield. "There were certainly some budding engineers in the group."

Later that day, the students' completed bridge structures were moved to the school's library, the site of the public open house. That event drew 35 area residents, among them current Ashland Mayor John Morrison, former Ashland Mayor Alan DeBoer, a city commissioner and a member of the local arts commission. While Zetlin and HNTB explained to attendees the construction plans and requested input on closure times and preferred communication methods, the gumdrop bridges served as sugary symbols of ODOT's commitment to broad-based, creative community involvement and outreach.