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Road project helps Mitchell's economy

Million-dollar bridge upgrade ripples through small town

Travelers in Eastern Oregon on U.S. 26 near Prineville may notice the drive is a lot smoother. What may be less obvious is that, besides improving the highway by laying new asphalt, replacing a bridge and preparing to replace another, the Oregon Department of Transportation and its contractors also helped to improve the economy of the nearby small town of Mitchell.

Across the state, the state bridge delivery program is repairing and replacing hundreds of aging bridges. For many Oregon cities, bridge program work does more than strengthen bridges — the work starts a ripple of economic gain that resonates through their communities.

For the small town of Mitchell, the local restaurants were the first businesses to experience the benefits of a bridge project in the area.

"The crew came in here for breakfast, lunch and dinner," said Dajuana Dodd, who owns the Little Pine Cafe with her husband. "It really boosted our sales. We got to know everyone by their first names, and we really enjoyed having them here."

The town's local motel and RV park also quickly profited from the construction activity. While working almost non-stop from August to September to finish the highway bridge on time, 30 to 50 crew members chose to stay overnight in town.

As contractors spent money on materials and labor locally, many of Mitchell's businesses experienced brisker sales.

"Our downtown businesses did very well," said Nancy Fitzgerald, Mitchell's mayor. "They're looking forward to the construction of the next bridge."

Along with the stores, several Mitchell families saw an increase in income during the construction work when some of the townspeople were hired to work on crews.

"One of the people hired to work as a flagger is actually a shop owner in town," said Benny Cox, an ODOT project inspector. "The people of Mitchell are a great

group, and it was wonderful that some of them were able to work on this project."

By working with its contractor to secure a closer, more cost-effective source for asphalt mix, the agency was able to pave an additional two miles of the highway not in the project's original budget.

The construction on U.S. 26 affects more than just Mitchell: The region's farmers, ranchers and loggers depend on the highway to get their products to metro hubs such as Portland and Salem. With the new bridge and the smoother road, they are able to haul more freight and conduct more business.

"A million-dollar project has a big impact on a town," said Peter Murphy, ODOT's public affairs representative in Bend. "The money and work from these projects ripples through the surrounding communities."

"Oregon's bridges are cities' geographical link to the outside world," Murphy said. "While ODOT updates these vital infrastructures, the agency is working hard to ensure that small towns prosper just as much as the large cities."

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