

Rail Advisory Committee (RAC)

Tuesday, March 18, 2025

9:00 a.m. - 12:00 p.m.

Meeting Minutes

Attending RAC Members

Bruce Carswell, Chair, Jaguar Transport Holdings

Johan Hellman, Co-Chair, BNSF Railway

Arron Hunt, Union Pacific

Toby Van Altvorst, Goose Lake Railway

Jake Boone, City of Garibaldi

Chase Kitchen, Amtrak

Chris Myron, Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Trainmen

Ross Lane, Genesee & Wyoming Railroad Service

Bob Krebs, AORTA

Welcome, Introductions, and Committee Business

- Quorum confirmed
- December 17, 2024, minutes approved

Connect Oregon and Policy Plan Update

- Most projects from the 9th cycle of Connect Oregon have had their grant agreements executed.
- The Federal Match Program allows applicants to use Connect Oregon funds as a match source for federal funding is open. The available funding for the Federal Match Program is estimated to be \$10M; however, the Oregon Transportation Commission (OTC) has not set a limit. Applications for the Federal Match Program cannot be submitted until a Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Federal Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO) has been published for a grant program. The match money would only be provided if the applicant is awarded an FRA grant. The OTC has given pre-approval to the Port of Portland and Port of Newport applications pending completion of the Connect Oregon processes and meeting applicable statutes.
- Connect Oregon staff think there will be enough funding for another Connect Oregon cycle in 2026. The application process would start in the fall of 2025.
- The Transportation Safety Action Plan update is on a five-year update schedule and due in 2027.
- The State Freight Plan is due to be updated in 2027. That project is currently out for consultant proposals to complete the update.

The Oregon Highway Plan update is also being updated, and negotiations are underway to define the scope of work. It is a large contract and will take some time.

Oregon State Rail Plan Update

- ODOT will open a public survey on the Oregon State Rail Plan on March 19, 2025. The survey will be open until May 30, 2025. The survey has an interactive map feature that allows individuals to put locationally their kinds of needs, priorities, and issues.
- ODOT has engaged interested parties and railroads beyond members of the Rail Advisory Committee.
- Key topics of the Oregon State Rail Plan update include passenger rail, freight rail, and highway-rail crossing safety.
- ODOT, Union Pacific Railroad, and the FRA are finishing corridor modeling for passenger rail in Oregon to implement the Oregon Passenger Rail Service Development Plan.
- As part of the OSRP update work, 16 electronic sensors were deployed along Class I railway corridors at key locations within the state plus one in Northern California. The sensors collect and report data in real time, enabling ODOT to better understand freight rail volumes, equipment usage and operating characteristics such as train length.
- ODOT requested that a couple of RAC members or more join a sub-committee that will inform the OSRP update. Toby Van Altvorst, Chase Kitchen, Bob Krebs, and Ross Lane volunteered to join this RAC sub-committee.

Legislative Updates

- ODOT presented many times to the Joint Committee on Transportation and the Joint Ways and Means Committee during the 2025 Legislative Session.
- Over 3,300 bills have been introduced this legislative session. At the time of this meeting, ODOT is tracking around 600 bills with 150 labeled as high priority.
- On March 4th, ODOT gave a presentation to the Joint Committee on Transportation about freight and passenger rail investments, projects, and funding.
- At the beginning of March, ODOT delivered a series of presentations about the Governor's recommended budget. The ODOT budget bill is Senate Bill (SB) 5541.
- SB 689 would carve all rail functions out of ODOT and create the Oregon Rail Department. Bob Krebs raised the issue that there are some rail projects that were identified 25 to 30 years ago have still not been completed due to funding. Creating a new rail agency would not alleviate this issue as there needs to be more funding.
- Legislative Concept 4731 is expected to be introduced soon that will amend SB 689 to include transit in addition to rail.
- The Joint Ways and Means committee has planned a roadshow through the end of April that will examine the funding package.
- Constitutional Sine Die is June 29, 2025. The goal Sine Die is June 15, 2025.

Federal Updates

- ODOT continues to meet with federal officials to discuss rail work within the state.
- Work on the FRA CID Program is paused as reorganization happens at the federal level. Bruce Carswell noted that federal officials are conducting a full review of any NOFO or statutory language that contain language about equity or the environment.

- A RAC member noted that since the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements (CRISI) NOFO had specific language where applicants had to address environmental or equity issues, all CRISI projects are most likely under full review.
- It is unclear whether the next CRISI grant solicitation cycle will take place in Spring of 2025.
- The FRA paused the implementation of a dispatcher and signal worker certification program. Bruce Carswell noted that there is a clear need for the certification program to accommodate multiple business models.

Quarterly Updates

Public Transportation Division

- Karla Tackett is the new ODOT Rail Safety & Regulatory Branch Manager replacing Chris Malm. Karla comes from Motor Carrier with 16 years of compliance and enforcement experience.
- The ODOT Commerce and Compliance Division has a 12-person team of FRA certified inspectors. There are 2 inspectors per discipline. The disciplines are grade crossings and trespasser outreach, power and discipline, track, signals, and operating practices. The new crossing and trespassing discipline has inspectors check the Emergency Notification System (NES) signage placement, determine whether there is vegetation in the way of sight lines, and investigate incidents. Two people are on the clearance and walkway inspector team, five people are on the crossing safety team, and four people are on the state safety oversight team.
- The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) eliminated the matching fund requirement for Section 130 funds.
- Some Section 130 funds get distributed to ODOT Regions 3, 4, and 5. The next cycle of Section 130 funds will go towards projects that are currently in progress due to inflation raising project costs significantly.

Membership Refresh

- The update to the RAC charter is complete.
- The ODOT Tribal Liaison reached out to Oregon tribes requesting Tribal representation for the RAC. No response has been received thus far.
- We received an inquiry about the ADA position.
- ODOT staff will reach out to Oregon unions to fill the vacant union position.
- Efforts are underway to fill the freight rail shipper position. ODOT reached out to CoEnergy Propane but has not received a response. Bruce Carswell suggested that Bob Melbo reach out to Rick Franklin for a recommendation to fill the rail user position. Aaron Hunt suggested reaching out to Hampton Lumber to see if they had an individual that could fill the rail shipper RAC position. Hampton Lumber is currently in the process of negotiating to acquire the port at Tillamook Bay Railroad.
- Bruce Carswell will provide a recommendation for the vacant shortline railroad position.
- The final review and approval of the updated RAC charter will take place at the June meeting.

Passenger Rail

- The Portland to Eugene corridor of the Amtrak Cascades saw the highest ridership in the service's history in 2024. The previous ridership record was set in 2013.
- Amtrak shared with ODOT that train capacity has leveled out. Capacity is not being reached at peak times meaning there is still room for ridership growth in Oregon. Capacity is sometimes reached in Washington.
- The new Airo train cars to be delivered in 2026 will increase train capacity.
- On-time performance (OTP) fluctuated significantly in 2024 with a major dip in performance taking place in the summer and has leveled off around 75 percent in the past few months. The dip in OTP was due to equipment issues.
- The Amtrak Cascades has only had one Talgo trainset (Mt. Jefferson) in service for the last three months due to an accident involving a tree on the tracks. The other Talgo trainset (Mt. Bachelor) is expected to return to service in April.
- The increase in trespasser strikes, both injuries and fatalities, have played a role in the on-time performance issues.
- Delays for events such as the Shamrock Run in Portland are sometimes factored into OTP data.

High Speed Rail

- The Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT) is the lead agency for the Cascadia High-Speed Rail project. WSDOT received a \$49.7M grant that will support technical planning for the Cascadia region as well as collaboration and engagement with partners along the corridor. This next phase of work is to develop a corridor-wide service development plan. The alignment and station locations have not been identified. Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia will start engaging and collaborating with communities along the corridor in late 2025 and this work will end in late 2027 or early 2028. ODOT is working with Portland Metro to support the efforts that are outlined and approved by the FRA in step two of the project.

Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study

- The Amtrak Daily Long-Distance Service Study is now complete, and the report has been delivered to Congress.

Freight Rail Update

- The first 10 weeks of 2025 generally saw good news for the freight rail industry.
- Business nationwide is up 3.8 percent according to statistics from Progressive Rail.
- There is uncertainty surrounding how actions from the federal government such as imposing tariffs will affect freight rail business.
- Oregon's freight rail industry is relatively stable given that commodities handled within the state are sometimes insulated from world geopolitics. Freight rail customers must try and predict what will happen when deciding whether to keep various factory operations running. An example is the automotive industry where car parts may travel all throughout the country and to Mexico or Canada by freight rail. Corporations and industries must try and predict how tariffs imposed on important trade partners could affect these operations.

- UP is continuing to invest and build new railroad infrastructure. In the past five years UP has invested over \$430M in the State of Oregon, and they would like to continue at this general pace. Union Pacific could see layoffs due to tariffs.
- BNSF's load volumes are up slightly from previous years.
- There is a proposal to levy a \$1M fee on Chinese built ships calling at ports, which will have significant impacts on rail cargo.
- A trade war with Canada could significantly reduce the freight rail industry's ability to acquire fuel if a major natural disaster were to occur.
- Building manufacturing facilities or making any big capital investments in the current climate is unlikely and the shortlines have felt some volume loss year over year.

Public Comments

- Charles Bonville, a local project manager for a solar company, proposed the creation of a garbage train that would run to Arlington like Seattle's garbage train. The infrastructure could be funded and built at the Millersburg Intermodal Facility. A garbage train in Oregon has been talked about for many years. Republic Services has been working with Benton County to expand their footprint. The state's landfills will be full, and new landfills will not be permitted, therefore something needs to be done with the trash. In a project like this there must be a significant amount of stakeholder input brought to the table. There is a need to ensure that this project would be more cost-effective than current trash management operations.
- There is a business coming to the Millersburg facility that will provide biofuel and tank cars to transfer its trucks for distribution. These operations should be running very soon potentially even in the second quarter of 2025. This operation would only use a portion of the facility.
- Doug Allen, of AORTA, spoke about how AORTA told legislators that SB 689 would not be cost effective. He encouraged RAC members as well as other rail stakeholders to engage with legislators who are pro-rail and are looking to make adjustments to bills such as SB 689.
- Bruce Carswell acknowledged that if SB 689 incorporated additional funding the bill would be more significant than taking what the state already has and rearranging it.
- Bruce Carswell recognized the need for the state to have a robust freight rail system as well as a robust passenger rail system. It is important for legislators to know the benefits to highways when cargo is moved by rail.

Agenda Build

- The next meeting is on June 17, 2025.
- The meeting will be held virtually.
- Bob Krebs requested that an item be added to the agenda to discuss the 2025 Pacific Northwest Economic Region annual summit that will take place in Portland in October.
- Kathy Holmes requested an item be added to the agenda to approve the revised RAC charter.

Closing Comments

- The meeting was adjourned at 11:33 A.M.