



# Oregon

Kate Brown, Governor

## Historic Columbia River Highway Advisory Committee

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Director Strickler  
355 Capitol St, NE MS 11  
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September 24, 2020

Dear Director Strickler,

The Historic Columbia River Highway Advisory Committee is a body dedicated to providing advice to the Oregon Department of Transportation along with the Oregon Parks and Recreation District (OPRD) on the reconnection and rehabilitation of the Historic Columbia River Highway and the Historic Highway State Trail. Our focus of the past 33 years has been how to reconnect the Historic Highway, and we're proud to be able to say that the full reconnection of the 73 miles is within reach. As we near completion of the State Trail, we recognize that the Historic Highway and Trail will continue to draw cyclists and hikers to the Oregon side of the Gorge to observe the breathtaking vistas and take in the world-class destination that we are working to create.

The Historic Columbia River Highway is notable and important as the first scenic highway in the United States, and the designer, Samuel C. Lancaster, ensured that the Highway reflected the highest aesthetic and engineering standards for its time, that "laid lightly on the land." In addition, the highway was designed as a tourist facility, so, as Sam Hill said, "We can cash in year after year on our crop of scenic beauty, without diminishing it in any way."

In order to continue this scenic experience in the Columbia River Gorge, the Historic Highway Advisory Committee has articulated a vision statement, which includes the following:

Preserve, restore and maintain drivable portions of the Historic Columbia River Highway, including historic features, for slow speed enjoyment of waterfalls, cliff faces, tree-lined "canopies", colorful wildflower meadows, and open vistas. It is the journey, not the destination that matters.

Provide a safe and positive visitor experience throughout the length of the Historic Highway and the State Trail between Troutdale and The Dalles. Given the expected population growth of the Portland – Vancouver metropolitan area, this may require limiting speeds, limiting access to certain attractions at specified times, encouraging alternative modes of transportation, controlling and charging for parking, and encouraging visitors to start their Gorge experience from Portland or from one of the Gorge communities.

Over the past thirty or so years, we have also seen an increase in congestion and safety issues throughout the corridor as the number of vehicles traveling the Historic Highway has grown, creating concerns that the current situation is not meeting the committee's vision statements.

Since 2014, the Historic Columbia River Highway Advisory Committee has been confronted with congestion issues along the "Waterfall Corridor" of the Historic Highway (Historic Highway) between Portland Women's Forum and Ainsworth State Park. Some of the major issues include:

- Multnomah Falls is the most visited natural recreation site in Oregon.
- Between April and November, parking lots often fill before 10 am and remain full until around 5 pm.
- Frequent traffic back-ups near Multnomah Falls on the Historic Highway exasperate motorists and hinder search and rescue, police, fire and other emergency service providers.

- Careless drivers create a serious safety hazard at the I-84 Exit 31 parking lot, which is frequently full. Vehicles occasionally back up onto the fast lane of Interstate 84 at this left exit while trying to enter the lot. There have been fatal crashes at this exit and serious safety concerns remain.
- Designated parking areas for other waterfall trailheads accessible from the Historic Highway are often full by mid-day and motorists waiting for available parking spaces back up traffic and/or park illegally.
- Completion of the State Trail, expected in the mid 2020's, will significantly increase the number of bicyclists (and pedestrians) on the Historic Highway between Troutdale and The Dalles as visitors and recreationists will be drawn by the world-class facility under development. Conflicts already exist between motorists and bicyclists along the "Waterfall Corridor" and these conflicts will increase as visitor demand increases.
- Because the Historic Highway pavement is narrow and curves are sharp, larger vehicles — such as RVs and tour buses — have trouble maneuvering when the Historic Highway is crowded with smaller vehicles.

ODOT and its partners (USFS and OPRD) have worked together for years trying to mitigate congestion while continuing to allow unrestricted access to the Historic Highway and Multnomah Falls. There is a need for all organizations involved in land and transportation management in the Columbia River Gorge to collaborate on developing a vision for the future. Organizations on the Oregon side of the River include the USFS, OPRD, ODOT, Gorge Commission, Hood River, Wasco, and Multnomah Counties as well as local transportation and transit providers.

Mitigation actions accomplished or underway to date include:

- Installing overhead VMS signs warning when the Exit 31 parking lot is full.
- Installing gates to close the eastbound Exit 31 exit ramp.
- Removing or blocking informal parking areas along the Historic Highway.
- Striping fog lines to allow for parking enforcement.
- Posting pedestrian crossing guards at Multnomah Falls.
- Subsidizing public transit service from the Portland Metro Area (Gateway Transit Center) including a shuttle between Rooster Rock State Park and Multnomah Falls.
- Instituting an additional restriction on vehicle length between Portland Women's Forum and Ainsworth State Park from 50 feet to 35 feet.
- Lowering the speed limit east of Corbett to Bridal Veil from 55 mph to 40 mph.
- Creating a "Gorge Forum" to continue conversations on access and congestion challenges amongst agency partners in the Gorge.
- Coordinating with existing programs, such as Ready, Set, GORge! communication and outreach to move visitation further east and to less busy times to reduce peak demands on the Waterfall Corridor.
- Developing a long-term Columbia Gorge Express transit funding and governance strategy: Columbia Area Transit took over inter-city service in November 2019. The Rooster Rock shuttle has funding through summer 2021.

While these actions help reduce congestion, they are unable to keep pace with the overwhelming increasing population of the Portland-Vancouver metro area. Looking forward, the population of the Portland Metro area is projected to increase 30-35% by 2040 — adding an additional 525,000 people. Many of these newcomers will be outdoor enthusiasts who will be heading to the Gorge and other outdoor recreation destinations within a 90-mile radius to recreate on a frequent basis. How are we going to accommodate them?

## Historic Highway Advisory Committee Recommendations

After careful consideration, the Historic Highway Advisory Committee concludes that maintaining unfettered access to the drivable Waterfall Corridor of the Historic Highway while managing the limited parking supply no longer works. We must find a new approach to providing a quality recreational experience consistent with the National Scenic Area and the historic nature of the Highway. Visitors are less likely to enjoy the scenic vistas and take in the grandeur of the journey when they are stuck in traffic congestion or searching for a rare parking space in a corridor full of vehicles. Today's experience is not consistent with the world-class destination the original designers envisioned.

Therefore, pursuant to the Advisory Committee's responsibilities under Senate Bill 766 (1987), we are formally recommending that management of the "Waterfall Corridor" of the Historic Columbia River Highway (from Portland Women's Forum to Ainsworth State Park) be changed from a "car centric" to a "transit and bicycle oriented" approach

that is more welcoming to all forms of transportation. We understand ODOT, USFS, and OPRD staffs will need to undertake much integrated planning with stakeholders and the public in order to make these kinds of changes.

For example, our discussions have included the following points to consider:

- Develop a free Waterfall Corridor shuttle to encourage the spreading of recreation use over the entire 13 miles of the Waterfall Corridor.
- Convert the Exit 31 lot to a transit hub, excluding personal vehicles. Tour bus operators and regional transit providers will use the transit center.
- Control visitor personal vehicle access to the Waterfall Corridor during heavy recreational use hours and days. Maintain access for the approximately 50 homeowners, businesses, including access for vendors, bicyclists, emergency services and employees.
- Allow the public to have full access via private vehicles to the Historic Highway when the shuttle is not in operation.
- Secure one or more large parking lots (e.g., Rooster Rock, Troutdale, Cascade Locks) to intercept motorists heading to Multnomah Falls. Recreationists will need to be shuttled to and from Multnomah Falls (Exit 31 on I-84).
- Identify sustainable funding such as a parking charge or other visitor fee to pay for this shuttle service and the Waterfall Corridor shuttle.
- Continue regional transit service linking Portland, Troutdale, Multnomah Falls, Cascade Locks, Hood River, Mosier and The Dalles. This will ensure that persons without access to a personal vehicle will have equitable access to Multnomah Falls and the Waterfall Corridor.
- Work with USFS, FHWA, Oregon, Washington, transit providers, tour operators, local governments, transportation management organizations, other stakeholders and the public to develop a Regional Transportation Access Plan
- Consider the development of an online app to provide prospective visitors with a way to book their time to visit the falls or ride transit.
- Request federal funds for the U.S. Forest Service, in partnership with Oregon and Washington to develop a set of alternatives and lead a NEPA effort to identify any legislative changes and enable the agency to move forward with implementing a new approach.

## Summary

The present car centric approach to managing congestion on the Historic Highway is no longer working. Conversion to a transit and bicycle oriented approach offers the best chance of managing use going forward while providing recreationists with a high quality outdoor experience. We ask that you take the lead with agency partners to move forward with this recommendation. The Advisory Committee is ready to meet with you and/or the Oregon Transportation Commission to discuss our recommendation in detail.

Regards,



Arthur Babitz, Chair  
Hood River County Governor's Appointee



Wayne P. Stewart, Vice-Chair  
Multnomah County Appointee



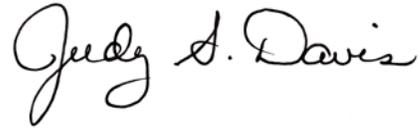
Bill Pattison, Hood River County Appointee



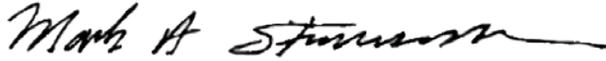
Ernie Drapela, Multnomah County Governor's Appointee



Francie Royce, Wasco County Governor's Appointee



Judy Davis, Wasco County Appointee



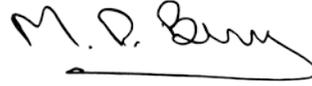
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