

Friends of French Prairie

Friends of French Prairie
is an Oregon non-profit corporation

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April 3, 2017

Chair Caddy McKeown, House Committee on Transportation Policy

Vice-Chairs: Mark Meek & Richard Vial

Members: Greg Barreto, Paul Evans, Susan McLain, Ron Noble, Carl Wilson, Brad Witt

Greetings;

I write on behalf of Friends of French Prairie, a land use advocacy organization in the north Willamette Valley, focusing on French Prairie: Oregon's historic and agricultural heartland. This letter is to document our opposition to HB 3231, which authorizes cities and counties to form a special taxing and revenue district to finance and create limited access tollways.

While promulgating such a law will have state-wide implications, perhaps more importantly is this bill's authorizing districts to override designations of rural reserves. As an organization that has been actively engaged in Metro's Urban/Rural Reserve process for almost a decade, we understand just how important these designations are to define areas for urbanization and development, and to protect the best farm and forest lands from development for the coming forty to fifty years.

After all the work, time, effort over the years on the part of Metro, its Counties, its Cities, dozens of task forces and committees, to say nothing of individual citizens in order to arrive at an agreed upon definition of the Metro Urban/Rural Reserves, it is just short of outlandish for a legislator from one of the Metro counties that was party to that process to put forward a bill that would trump that very process and enable the paving by toll districts of farm, forest and natural resource areas within Metro and the surrounding areas.

The ardor with which we state our opposition has a basis in fact beyond our involvement in the Urban/Rural Reserves process. As this bill was being developed, concerned parties in French Prairie including City of St. Paul, City of Donald and Friends of French Prairie were consulted. We uniformly presented in painful detail why any such road should not cross

French Prairie due to the loss of the highest quality farm land in the state, the negative impact on local agriculture, the inadequate infrastructure at I-5 to facilitate a connection, etc. We were given the impression that the case we made was heard, but as the bill came to light the suggested connection to I-5 turns out, in fact, to cross French Prairie!

One cannot argue with the need that western Washington County has to address its traffic problems. However, dumping that traffic into Marion County at the expense of the best farmland in the State is not the solution, and ignores the larger impacts and consequences in favor of the local, immediate and self-serving benefits.

The precedence set by such a bill, to say nothing of the havoc it would wreak within Metro and across French Prairie is monumental!

Please oppose this bill and do not advance it out of committee.

Sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Benjamin D Williams". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a light blue rectangular stamp.

Benjamin D Williams

Friends of French Prairie

New bypass highway in Washington County? Oregon lawmaker wants to pave the way

The Oregonian/Oregon Live

March 1, 2017 by Gordon Friedman



Rep. Rich Vial, R-Scholls, points to a map northwest Oregon in his Capitol office on Tuesday, Feb. 28, 2017 to show where a potential tollway may eventually built if a special district forms under legislation he is sponsoring. (Gordon Friedman/Staff)

SALEM -- A freshman state representative filed legislation Tuesday that would lay groundwork for constructing a new highway west of Interstate 5 through Washington County and up over the Columbia River. Shying away from the much-maligned Westside Bypass moniker, the bill's chief sponsor, [Rep. Rich Vial](#), R-Scholls, is giving his dream road a new name: the Northwest Passage.

If passed, Vial's bill would allow cities and counties anywhere in the state to form special districts for entering into public-private partnerships to build and operate limited-access highways. Co-sponsoring the legislation are [Rep. Brian Clem](#), D-Salem; [Rep. Brad Witt](#), D-Clatskanie; [Rep. Ron Noble](#), R-Yamhill; and legislative heavyweights [Sen. Mark Hass](#), D-Beaverton and [Sen. Brian Boquist](#), R-Dallas.

The bill is hugely ambitious, a fact not lost on Vial, who has likened himself to the ever-optimistic Don Quixote. And it comes at a time when lawmakers are fretting over a projected \$1.7 billion state budget deficit.

Separately, a select group of legislators are working to pass a massive [statewide transportation spending package](#) aimed at maintaining and preserving Oregon's roads and bridges and reducing metro-area traffic.

But Vial said his bill, [House Bill 3231](#), is in a category of its own because the limited-access highways it permits would be financed with tolls, bonds or local taxes instead of state or federal money. Vial declined to say how much each toll may cost drivers, but said the total bill for constructing the Northwest Passage could reach \$12 billion to \$20 billion.

He also said his idea is different from the Westside Bypass -- a plan killed and resurrected time and again over three decades -- because it would allow local governments to set their own plans. "It only authorizes local communities to come together," Vial said of the bill. "It doesn't have a route statement with a funding source behind it."

If passed, HB 3231 doesn't guarantee that a special district would form to build the Northwest Passage. But, voters could eventually elect city and county representatives who favor the idea, Vial said.

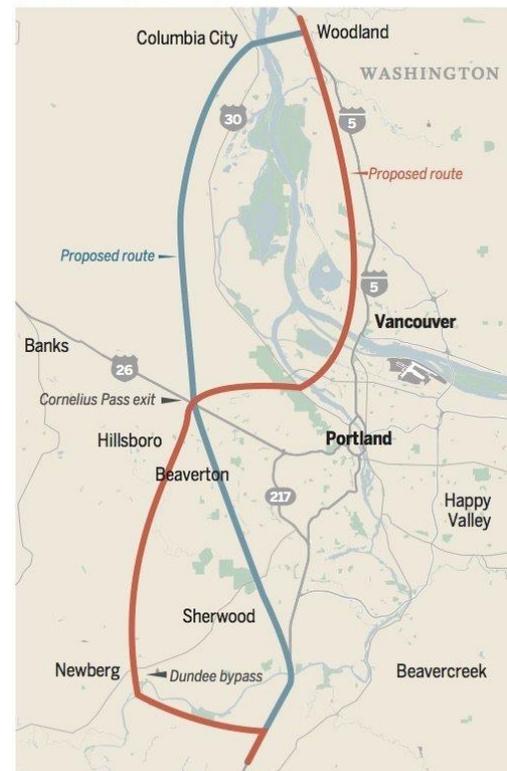
He declined to map the exact route he imagines for the Northwest Passage highway, saying that decision would be up to elected special district members. But, he said the highway might veer west of I-5 near Hubbard and rejoin it near Ridgefield, Wash., after crossing the Columbia River at Columbia City or St. Helens.

Under Vial's bill, special districts would be given broad powers to claim land for constructing a limited-access highway, including condemnation and right-of-way powers. The district would also be able to override local designations that protect "rural reserve" land. Vial said he's aware that aspect of the bill will likely rankle some environmentalists.

'Yep, some are going to be troubled by this,' " he said.

Possible routes for West Metro tollway

Proponents of a proposed westside limited access highway have not mapped an exact route, but Rep. Rich Vial said it might follow one of the two routes shown below.



"It would be disingenuous of me to try to argue anything other than,

Despite obvious hurdles -- both political and environmental -- Vial is undeterred, saying a limited-access highway west of I-5 is needed regardless. Rush-hour congestion on I-5, U.S. 26 and OR 217 particularly rile commuters from Washington County as well as other areas of the Portland metro area and Southwest Washington.

"Heck yeah it's ambitious. But the whole point is we have to be ambitious or nothing will get done," he said. "Ultimately, this is simply my attempt to allow us to look bigger than anything we've been doing, which really isn't solving our problem."

Vial said his idea for the Northwest Passage germinated from trips to his law firm's Colorado office, where he frequently drove a road called E-470. The 47-mile highway bypasses Denver and was built by a special district that paid for the project with tolls instead of state or federal funding or tax increases.

Today, E-470 has one of the most expensive toll rates in the country, according to the Denver Post, with a price of up to \$17.45 for cars and \$69.80 for trucks to drive the entire highway. But, 25 years after its opening, E-470 is bringing in more drivers and more money than expected.

Back in his district, which extends across Wilsonville, Sherwood and up to Reedville, Vial said constituents told him loud and clear: Fix congestion issues in Washington County. So, he sought the advice of former Colorado Gov. Bill Owens, who headed the state while E-470 was under construction, and got to drafting his bill.

But local governments officials aren't lining up to support the plan. In separate statements to The Oregonian/OregonLive, Hillsboro Mayor Steve Callaway and Washington County Board Chairman Andy Duyck applauded Vial for his creative thinking, but said their focus is elsewhere -- chiefly on the Legislature's developing transportation package. "We thank Representative Vial for his interest in addressing the long-term transportation needs on the west side of the Portland region," Duyck said. "The Legislature needs to focus on a statewide package to address three major bottlenecks in our region, including Highway 217, the I-5 Rose Quarter area and I-205."

And, at least one lawmaker already stands against Vial's proposal. [Rep. Julie Parrish](#), R-West Linn, said she remains categorically opposed to any legislation that could result in tolling and worries about how special districts would handle right-of-way acquisition for building a big new highway. "People in my district really don't like tolls," Parrish said.

Vial said he hopes to convince Parrish of his views.

Officials working in St. Helens, Scappoose and Woodland, Wash. -- cities the Northwest Passage may go through or beside -- said Tuesday that they hadn't heard of Vial's plan.

"We've done a fair amount of analysis of what some kind of crossing or bypass might look like, but it hasn't really ever gone anywhere," said St. Helens City Administrator John Walsh, who added that Vial's proposal is "intriguing."

Scappoose Mayor Scott Burges said regional congestion is "definitely an issue that needs to be solved," but declined to comment on Vial's plan because he was unfamiliar with its details.

At the state level, officials are also mum. Travis Brouwer, assistant ODOT director, declined to comment, saying the agency needs to take an in-depth look at Vial's bill.

Still, Vial and ODOT Director Matt Garrett sparred at a transportation committee subgroup meeting late Monday night, with Vial arguing in support of private-sector tolling technology and Garrett criticizing those systems as too expensive.

For his part, Vial said he's thinking big and going full steam ahead with his plans -- despite reticence from other legislators.

"A lot of the senior members in the Legislature are like, 'Oh Rich, that's such a nice idea. Go at 'em. Good for you.' And I believe that their time in the Legislature has left them with knowledge that I'm maybe blessed not to have," he said. "The reality is that you only get to be ignorant once and sometimes that's a blessing."