

Michelle Healy
Planning and Park Services Director
Bend Park and Recreation District
HB 4029 - Testimony
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Chair Clem and Members of the Committee, I am Michelle Healy, the planning and park services director for the Bend Park and Recreation District. Thank you for the time to provide information about HB 4029.

HB 4029 would prohibit the construction of a bridge over the Deschutes River on the south end of Bend that is necessary to complete the Deschutes River Trail (DRT). The DRT is the backbone of the trail system in Bend, and the community has been at work for decades to complete the full extent of the trail along the Deschutes River from the community of Tumalo, through Bend to Sunriver.

The connection of the trail via a bridge south of Bend is referenced in several public planning documents dating back to the 1990s, including in the Bend Park and Recreation District's Trails Plan, the City of Bend's Transportation System Plan, and the Deschutes River Trail Action Plan. It is also included in the Deschutes National Forest Alternative Transportation Feasibility Study (if environmental concerns could be addressed) that was completed in 2015.

In November 2012, the District voter's approved a bond package that included a number of park projects including the completion of the Deschutes River Trail. The projects were widely publicized by a campaign committee and information material was mailed to every resident in Bend.

After the passage of the bond measure the District began in earnest to complete the project, by convening a Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) in 2014. This 22-member group evaluated 5 possible bridge locations and 8 trail connections. The CAC went through an extensive process that included numerous committee meetings (that were open to the public), a general public meeting with over 100 attendees, and the mailing of a questionnaire to 874 homes on both sides of the river to collect input about the project. After months of work the CAC ultimately recommended the bridge be located on federal land on both sides of the river, and that the District pursue the trail alignment offered by the adjoining private landowner on the east side of the river. This trail alignment was reaffirmed with the property owner in January 2017 when the District entered in a letter of intent for the trail during the land use permitting for the new 78-unit residential subdivision currently underway. The attached map shows the preferred location of the bridge and trail alignment.

This proposed project continues to be a strongly held community desire. As a tool in updating the District's Comprehensive Plan, a statistically valid community survey conducted in March and April of 2017 found that 72% of respondents either favor or strongly favor the bridge while only 14 percent oppose or strongly oppose the bridge. The survey has a confidence level of 95%.

This proposed bridge is located on a segment of the Deschutes River that is classified as both State Scenic Waterway and Federal Wild and Scenic River. Any proposed development would be subject to those existing regulations and oversight, including an extensive federal NEPA analysis to identify and evaluate environmental impacts and/or potential mitigations. The NEPA analysis would provide necessary information about the potential impacts and would include the public in the process.

The District carefully plans all projects with the public, and follows regulatory processes to identify, evaluate and mitigate impacts. In the past 10 years, we successfully constructed four pedestrian bridges over the Deschutes River, each one addressing pertinent environmental requirements. Most recently, we received approval from Deschutes County and Oregon State Parks for a new footbridge over the Deschutes River on the north side of Bend near Riley Ranch Nature Reserve to further connect the Deschutes River Trail.

Like the bridge under discussion in HB 4029, this bridge on the north side of town was also part of the District's 2012 Bond measure and is located in a State Scenic Waterway. This bridge, located in the Middle Deschutes Scenic Waterway, connects the DRT to Tumalo State Park, and also connects users to the Riley Ranch Nature Reserve (RRNR). RRNR is 184 acres of land that was originally slated for urban development, but was instead purchased by the District for parkland. Opened in December 2017, Riley Ranch prohibits dogs, bikes and large groups from the site due to the sensitive environmental features within the park. This type of management is an example of the District's commitment to environmental stewardship.

The placement of the possible footbridge on the south side of town could help thousands of current residents, many already using the National Forest trails and off leash area, avoid an up to 16 mile roundtrip car trip to the National Forest by providing alternative access via foot or bike. This bridge would help address the growing congestion on our local roads and the limited parking within the National Forest. It also helps promote equity of access for all citizens to our federal public lands.

The extension of the DRT to the national forest is a complex project, even without state legislation. And, while I've shared many of the potential advantages of a bridge, we recognize that more conversation is needed with local stakeholders. There are voices that want to be heard and we want to listen. This project started years ago at the local level; please give our community a chance to work through the merits of this proposed project back in Bend rather than through legislation. Thank you for your consideration.