

Friends of the Grand Staircase

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May 3, 2019

Senator Fred Girod, Co-Chair

Representative Paul Holvey, Co-Chair

Joint Ways and Means Subcommittee on Capital Construction

Oregon State Capitol

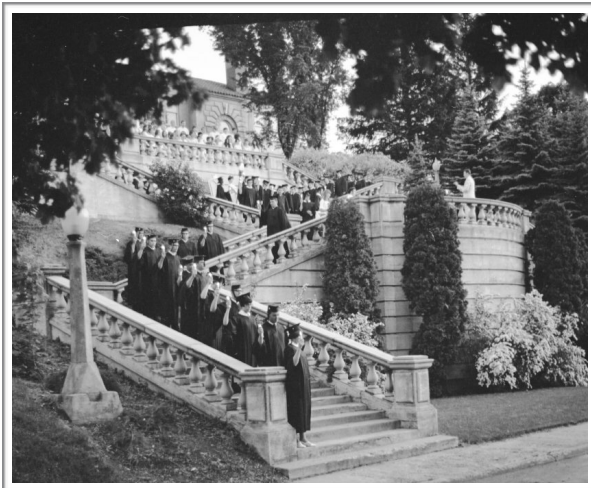
900 Court Street, HR E

Salem, Oregon 97301

Co-Chairs, Girod and Holvey and Members of the Committee:

We are writing on behalf of the Friends of the Grand Staircase, a group of individuals with deep roots in rural Oregon who have been dedicated for more than a decade to restoring the historical staircase at Eastern Oregon University (EOU).

We urge you to support the Governor's recommended budget to invest \$3 million in capital support so this national and state treasure can be restored, the EOU campus and the City of La Grande can be reconnected, and this icon can be reopened to the public in support of our regional and cultural tourism economy.



The Grand Staircase at EOU was designed by Oregon master architect John V. Bennes whose work also includes a major redesign of the Geiser Grand Hotel in Baker City and design of the hotel at Hot Lake Resort near La Grande. The five-tier, Italian Renaissance Revival staircase has been called "the most majestic steps in Oregon" and was completed in 1929.

The Grand Staircase is in the State Historic Registry and the National Register of Historic Places, and Restore Oregon has designated the staircase as one of "Oregon's Most Endangered Places."

This is not just another staircase. It has an amazing 178 steps, 418 stone balusters, and is unique in its scale, complexity, and beauty among landscape staircases in the United States. It has been compared to the Spanish Steps in Rome.

When we tell people about the Grand Staircase they say, "That sounds nice." When we show them a picture they say, "Wow!"

Sadly, over the decades, the Grand Staircase has deteriorated, and it has been closed to public access since 2004. Already vulnerable, harsh weather conditions, underground water, vandalism and other environmental factors have contributed to its continued decline.

Because of the Grand Staircase designation as both a national and state historic landmark, the approach to rebuilding must adhere to historically accurate and authentic standards which increases the costs to restore.

While there is an economic opportunity for the staircase to become a stellar attraction for tourism, the true value is about preserving an important piece of Oregon's history for a region that does not have a lot of infrastructure like this to tell Oregon's story.

Many of the over 1000 Friends of the Grand Staircase grew up in La Grande and/or attended EOU, and we are grateful to have this amazing architectural treasure as part of our personal histories. We climbed the labyrinth-like steps, we soaked in the view of Mt. Emily from the top, we listened to the university choir and orchestra perform from the staircase at dusk on a summer evening. We would like future generations of rural Oregonians as well as out-of-town visitors to be able to have these same experiences.



The urgency for investment is now. In a few short years, unprotected exposure to environmental factors such as snow, ice, and water will destroy this historic landmark and state treasure to the point of no return.

Over the years the university has invested significant resources in the study, design and planning phases to determine the most cost effective, but historically accurate, way to restore the staircase.

The City of La Grande has made investments in the main street corridor to complement the

restoration of the staircase as part of a strategic vision for economic development and community livability.

Because this is not just a university asset but a regional asset that preserves the history of La Grande and the eastern part of the state, we urge the state to be a partner in its restoration.

The cost of its loss - and losing a part of Oregon's history - far exceeds the investment the state can make this session to help preserve and restore this staircase.

Please support \$3 million for the Grand Staircase at Eastern Oregon University.

Sincerely,

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