



To: Joint Subcommittee on Transportation and Economic Development

From: Johnny Earl, SEIU 503 President

Date: March 11, 2025

RE: HB 5541 ODOT Budget

Dear Co-Chair Woods, Co-Chairs Gomberg, and members of the committee,

For the record my name is Johnny Earl, president of SEIU 503. Our union represents over 72,000 workers who provide critical services in every corner of the state. At ODOT, we represent 2,500 hardworking men and women from transportation maintenance specialists to sign makers, from mechanics to electricians to so many more.

I'm writing this committee with urgency to address the budget crisis at ODOT. In recent years, ODOT has rang the alarm of an impending budget cliff, announcing that the agency may lay off 1,000 workers. Without major legislative action, Oregon's travelling public will quickly feel the impact as our transportation system begins to deteriorate beyond repair and there are no crews to clear roads after a landslide or a major weather event.

I urge members of this committee to work with your colleagues to pass a budget focused on funding ODOT's core functions and the crews who work tirelessly to keep Oregonians moving. Whether you're trucking freight across the state, picking up a prescription, or shuttling the kids to baseball practice, we all rely on safe and well-maintained roads.

Oregon's highways, roads, and bridges are more than just the paths we travel on—they are the backbone of our state's economy. Every day, millions of Oregonians rely on these roads to get to work, access healthcare, transport goods, and visit loved ones. Our transportation system connects our communities, supports local businesses, and drives our state's economy.

Failure to maintain and preserve our roads will inevitably lead to higher repair costs, more frequent disruptions, and increased safety risks, all of which have significant economic consequences. Poorly maintained roads result in more accidents, longer travel times, and increased vehicle operating costs due to potholes and road deterioration.

Without action, the deterioration of our transportation impact key industries like tourism at Oregon State Parks. Oregon is home to some of the most beautiful state parks in the nation, attracting millions of visitors each year. In 2023 alone, over 52 million visitors came to our state parks, and tourism generated billions in economic activity. The state parks are vital for local economies, especially in rural areas where tourism often serves as a primary source of income. However, these parks are only accessible if we have well-maintained roads and highways that allow visitors to reach them safely and efficiently.

Oregon's weather is known for its unpredictability, and extreme events such as risks to public safety, economic stability, and emergency response efforts.

Maintaining our roads during these extreme weather events is essential. Whether it's clearing snow from mountain passes during winter storms or ensuring access routes remain open during wildfire season, we must be prepared to respond quickly and effectively. Highways that are closed or impassable during extreme weather create dangerous situations, particularly for those in rural or remote areas who may need emergency assistance or essential services. If the heavy equipment needed to remove debris from a landslide or heavy snowfall is under repair for long length of times because of staffing shortage because of layoffs this could be disastrous for some of our State's rural and urban communities. The work that ODOT does tries us all together.

In my own experience once I was driving home back to Eugene from Klamath Falls and decided to take a more scenic route by driving now Highway 38. A few miles off highway 97, I got a flat tire. I didn't have a car jack with me, so I tried calling a road assistance service. I had no cell phone reception. After about 2 hours so, right around sunset. ODOT showed up to assist me. I have heard from many of our women members who always felt safe when ODOT emergency repones vehicles showed up on our urban or rural highways.

A well-maintained road system ensures that emergency responders can continue their life-saving work during these critical times. Moreover, it allows us to protect Oregonians, minimize the economic damage caused by extreme weather, and recover more swiftly after such events.

In conclusion, maintaining and preserving our highways and roads is not just a matter of convenience—it is an essential investment in our state's economy, public safety, and quality of life. Our roads are the lifeblood of Oregon's tourism industry, our communities,

and our ability to respond to emergencies. By passing a budget that prioritizes the maintenance and preservation of Oregon's transportation infrastructure, you will help ensure that we can continue to support a thriving economy, provide safe access to our state parks, and keep Oregonians safe during extreme weather events.

I respectfully ask you to consider the long-term benefits of investing in our transportation infrastructure and urge you to pass a budget that supports the Oregon Department of Transportation's core services.

Thank you for your time and attention.

Sincerely,

Johnny Earl, SEIU 503 President