



To: Ways and Means Subcommittee on Transportation and Economic Development

From: Jason Lawrence

Date: March 11, 2025

RE: SEIU ODOT Members and ODOT's Budget Crisis

Dear Co-Chair Gomberg, Co-Chair Woods, and members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Jason Lawrence, and I am an ODOT employee and proud to serve as Vice President of SEIU Sublocal 730, which represents over 2,500 workers at ODOT – or the heart of the Boots and Blue Jeans Coalition, as I like to say. I am writing to testify on the ODOT budget and ask the committee to consider the real impacts of ODOT's budget crisis. Your constituents will quickly feel the consequences of inaction.

Our members are the ones issuing permits, responding to incidents, clearing landslides, plowing roads and enforcing chain laws roadside in dangerous winter storms to keep highways safe and open. We maintain almost 20,000 lane miles of state highways and roads. These highways range from major interstates to smaller state routes that connect all of Oregon. On average, we respond to more than 40,000 crashes annually: that's over 100 per day. These incidents have not only an economic impact, but also a significant human cost to our members. Our members are truly first responders, and they see the worst of the worst.

Much of the discussion so far has looked at the big projects and their big dollars, and rightfully so - there seems to be a lot of money that needs to be accounted for. Those dollars are above our paygrade, but our members can say that while we've seen so much focus on projects and cutting ribbons in recent years, our vital day-to-day work and simply keeping the lights on is overlooked.

In retrospect, it feels like HB 2017 was akin to budgeting for major home renovations while forgetting that you still need to account for paying the mortgage and utilities month-to-month, along with the day-to-day care your home generally needs.

And so here we sit today. We're all here because ODOT's budget is heading towards a revenue cliff. And you all are in the difficult position of deciding whether to course correct and avoid that cliff or leave around 1,000 Oregonians without a job. I want to quickly highlight why going over the cliff would be a disaster.

While ODOT budget cuts would negatively impact Oregon statewide, they will have a significant impact in coastal and rural communities. For example, we currently have roughly 200 workers covering over 5,000 lane miles in Region 5 in Eastern Oregon. A 20% or more reduction to those crews would leave us with significantly fewer people covering much larger areas. This means crews will be even more understaffed and overstretched, asked to do too much with too little, raising safety red flags for workers and the travelling public alike.

A reduction in staffing means highways closed due to landslides, snow, wildfires, and other major weather events. A reduction means that the public and business will sit longer in traffic while skeleton crews struggle to clean up after an accident.

In rural and coastal communities, a staff reduction means that lower priority roads and highways will begin to deteriorate rapidly. Fewer workers covering larger areas means Oregonians are going to need to wait longer for help if help is coming at all, because we will not have the staff, facilities or equipment.

In addition to the economic impact and general pain to the travelling public, decreases in workforce will increase the safety risk of our crews, which means higher chances that we're facing the worst roadside. As ODOT workers, we want to get home to our families and loved ones after every incident and after every maintenance project. Prioritize safety in your budget decisions by fully funding the crews that we need.

I encourage you and your colleagues in the legislature to reach out to us and arrange a shop visit. Come speak directly with our frontline workers and learn more about how cuts will negatively impact your constituents.

Additionally, I would caution legislators against outsourcing and privatizing core services is a solution. The state tried this before and it failed terribly, most notably evident by Project 219 back in 2011. At the end of the day, well-paid and respected employees do a better job, and it means they can live with dignity in the communities you represent.

We are proud civil servants. Commit to us and we'll show you why that's a wise investment.

In closing, I ask the Chairs, Vice-Chairs and members of the Committee to work with your colleagues at the Capitol. There are many lives at stake when it comes to highway safety.

Oregonians are looking for you to lead at this moment. Our Union stands ready to help.
Let's all work together to find a way to avoid this cliff.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Jason Lawrence

Vice President, ODOT Local 730 - SEIU 503