



Oregon

Tina Kotek, Governor

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DATE: March 19, 2025

TO: Joint Committee on Transportation

FROM: Suzanne Carlson – Public Transportation Administrator, Oregon Department of Transportation

SUBJECT: SB 715 – Creates the Cascadia High Speed Rail Task Force

INTRODUCTION

Senate Bill 715 creates the Cascadia High-speed Rail (HSR) Task Force. The measure specifies the membership and directs the task force to explore investing in high-speed rail in the Portland Metro area; to study and research high speed rail in Oregon; identify funding opportunities; and to develop recommendations and submit progress reports to the Legislature on high-speed rail in Oregon. Designates Metro as staff for the task force. The measure is repealed January 2, 2029.

BACKGROUND

The rail system in Oregon is predominantly owned by private railroads, yet freight and passenger rail services are critical components of the state's multimodal transportation network. Oregon recognizes the unique opportunities public and private sector collaboration presents and has a vested interest in proactively planning for the rail system's future so that Oregon's residents and businesses can capitalize on the many benefits freight and passenger rail services provide. In order to realize the full spectrum of benefits a transportation system that integrates passenger and freight rail provides, the State of Oregon takes an active role and partners with regional and local governments and private rail companies to proactively plan and explore investments to make the rail system in Oregon better by working together.

The Oregon State Rail Plan establishes a Vision Statement that is forward-looking to shape the future of the rail system in Oregon and ensure the beneficial outcomes of rail are realized. Oregon will have a safe, efficient and commercially viable rail system that serves its businesses, travelers and communities through private resources leveraged, as needed, by strategic public investments.

As directed by the Washington State Legislature, the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) worked together with jurisdictional partners in Oregon and British Columbia to develop approaches for governance, engagement, scenario planning, and funding for the Cascadia HSR Project, which is a WSDOT-led project to study HSR from Vancouver, British Columbia to Portland, Oregon. This work resulted in WSDOT receiving a federal grant award through the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Corridor Identification and Development (CID) Program in December 2024 to support a comprehensive and technical planning effort across the Cascadia megaregion to determine how a highspeed corridor can work alongside highways, existing passenger rail, air mobility, transit, and other modes to help achieve shared regional priorities.

As the state rail authority and to help realize the Oregon State Rail Plan vision statement, ODOT is a jurisdictional partner in the Cascadia HSR Project. Other jurisdictional partners include Metro, British Columbia Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, and Puget Sound Regional Council. To support the Cascadia HSR Project, ODOT hired a program manager and submitted a request for continued staffing through a Policy Option Package in the Governor's 2025-27 Budget.

The Cascadia HSR Project is currently in Step 2 of the FRA CID Program. WSDOT's CID federal grant agreement will advance the Cascadia HSR Project through Step 2, to develop a Service Development Plan for the corridor. As part of this process, ODOT and Metro are working collaboratively to identify tasks for which each partner is lead, co-lead, or support.

ODOT co-sponsors the Amtrak Cascades intercity passenger rail service with WSDOT and both states are working to ensure the Amtrak Cascades service is a feeder and support service to the Cascadia HSR Project.

DISCUSSION

The Oregon Transportation Plan (OTP), a document required by Oregon and federal statutes, is a primary component of the State of Oregon's long-range transportation plan. The Oregon State Rail Plan was developed to address the elements of the OTP guidance and ensure that rail policy and planning are in sync with the foundation provided by the OTP. ODOT is the lead designated agency developing and implementing the OTP and supporting modal and topic plans.

The CID Program Step 2 will include development of a purpose and need statement and engagement plans with agencies, Tribes, civic and business groups, public officials, interest groups, potential riders and railroads. ODOT will need to have a central role in the HSR Task Force and CID Program as ODOT would:

- Serve as state rail authority
- Align HSR with the Amtrak Cascades Service Development Plan
- Integrate state and local rail planning with the Oregon Transportation Plan, Oregon State Rail Plan, and related modal and topic plans
- Coordinate with jurisdictional partners and rail owners
- Hire industry-leading rail consultants
- Provide insights on engagement approaches and pitfalls
- Identify agencies, groups and representatives to engage
- Conduct engagement planning
- Review WSDOT and FRA draft documents

ODOT and Metro have collaborated closely in support of the Cascadia HSR Project through all phases, functionally serving as Oregon's co-lead agencies for this work. ODOT and Metro have outlined roles and responsibilities for Step 2 and these roles will also be applicable to support the Cascadia HSR Task Force.

CONCLUSION

Senate Bill 715 creates the Cascadia High-speed Rail Task Force, and establishes the membership, mission, and duties of the task force, and designates Metro as staff. Includes

reporting requirements and sunsets January 2, 2029. In partnership with Metro, ODOT will continue to lead the State of Oregon’s role and serve as a jurisdictional partner to the Cascadia HSR Project and task force, consistent with existing CID work. ODOT will also ensure these efforts are in alignment with the Oregon State Rail Plan, related modal plans and Amtrak Cascades to advance high-speed rail in Oregon.