

Submitter: Ariel Mendez
On Behalf Of: Councilor Ariel Mendez
Committee: Senate Committee On Transportation
Measure, Appointment or Topic: SB1542

Chair Gorsek, Vice Chair Weber, and members of the Senate Committee on Transportation,

Thank you for this opportunity to comment this evening [comments submitting instead].

My name is Ariel Mendez, and I am a city councilor in Bend, Oregon's fastest growing mid-size city. I am here providing comments in my individual capacity in support of SB 1542 and SB 1543.

A year and a half ago, I was picking up my daughter from grade school when I saw half a class run over to embrace one of their classmates. I quickly learned that this girl was actually a former classmate, who was returning to school for the first time since her family was killed in a deadly crash on US 97 in January 2024.

She was 11 years old, the sole survivor of that crash, and she had to move Portland because she had no surviving family members to care for her in Bend.

We routinely hear that safety is our residents biggest priority, and I desperately want to be able to look our constituents in the eye and tell them, we are doing everything we can to make our roads safer.

You are already aware that ODOT is embarking on a new method of creating a 10-year capital improvement plan. Let me give you a ground level view of how that is working in practice.

I recently worked with Bend's representative on the Central Oregon Area Commission on Transportation to formulate what the City of Bend's priority ODOT projects are. Without a uniform scoring metric to appropriately weight projects in terms of climate impact, accessibility, maintenance costs, and especially safety, we struggled to appropriately rank projects.

In addition, but these concerns span multiple jurisdictions. Bend and Redmond represent about 2/3 of the population in Deschutes County, but 2/3 of the fatal crashes countywide occur outside of Bend and Redmond, mostly on state highways. Bend's residents, including families like the one of that little girl, are dying outside of Bend. We asked to rank all area projects by which ones would save the most lives, but this current process doesn't do that.

We all travel on these roads and this is not a problem that a single jurisdiction can solve on its own. But you, the legislature, can. Listen to ODOT staff and OTC commissioners themselves who respectfully request the legislature to provide this kind of guidance. This isn't about politicizing an apolitical process, it is about making sure that transportation planning reflects the values that Oregon residents hold dearest. There is concern that SB 1542 might set back work that the area commissions have already engaged in, but I wouldn't mind if that work was reset because having a standardized scoring approach like what SB 1542 provides will make that work better.

You will also hear that there are different needs around the state, but what is the same is that safety is a priority and that we cannot afford to keep building infrastructure that we cannot afford to maintain.

SB 1542 and 1543 are not the whole answer, but they are steps in the right direction.

Thank you.