

Submitter: James Russell  
On Behalf Of:  
Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means Subcommittee On Capital Construction  
Measure, Appointment or SB5701  
Topic:

To: Joint Committee on Ways and Means Re: SB5701  
From: James Russell, Owner Whitewater Ranch, LLC  
Re: Support for McKenzie River Discovery Center Funding  
Date: February 13, 2026

Dear Co-Chairs and Committee Members,

I write in strong support of state funding for the McKenzie River Discovery Center, a shovel-ready project under active construction that will deliver immediate economic recovery to the fire-impacted McKenzie River corridor.

The MRDC is not a concept—it is happening now. With all permits secured, construction underway, exhibits ready for fabrication at OMSI, and pilot programming in development for implementation in 2027, this project represents a smart investment in rural economic resilience. The Discovery Center will attract 50,000 annual visitors generating \$7 million in regional economic activity, creating year-round jobs in a community still recovering from the catastrophic 2020 Holiday Farm Fire. These visitors will travel through Oregon's tourism gateway cities—Portland, Eugene, Bend, and Medford—supporting hotels, restaurants, and retail throughout the state while discovering a world-class environmental education destination in rural Lane County.

Our funding request is \$4.8 million. If obtained, this gives us the money to finish our capital assets—buildings and exhibits—and we open the Discovery Center in 2027!

Considering that recreation site of the Leaburg Dam, which creates the recreation area of Leaburg Lake, will be removed in a few years it is imperative to develop new tourism along the Highway 126 East corridor. In addition to preserving the McKenzie River boat and McKenzie Valley history, the Discovery Center will bring locals and tourists into our area that has been decimated by the Holiday Farm Fire of 2020.

As a local family, timber and blueberry farmer, I have watched this area slowly whither as more and more recreation and tourist opportunities are removed. Developing a world class center that focuses on local history and teaching about the importance of the McKenzie River is vital to help young people learn about our area, spend tourism dollars and appreciate this beautiful part of our state.

My family calls on you, as elected officials, to help make this project happen and enhance not only the McKenzie River Valley but enlighten all that visit it.

Thank you,

Jim Russell  
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