

Submitter: Nancy Ashley  
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: Nancy Ashley, Retiree and Local Resident since 1999  
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.

The Discovery Center will generate \$7 million in regional economic activity, creating year-round jobs in a community still recovering from the 2020 Holiday Farm Fire. Ecological damage, economic hardship, and cultural loss remain real. This project represents a smart investment in rural economic resilience. MRDC positions the McKenzie Valley as a model for sustainable rural recovery after wildfire — strengthening both our economy and our identity. Plus, the visitors to the center will support hotels, restaurants, and retail throughout the state while discovering a world-class environmental education destination in rural Lane County.

The McKenzie River Discovery Center transforms the historic Old McKenzie Fish Hatchery into a living public asset. Through its partnership with OMSI, MRDC is developing nationally respected, hands-on exhibits that bring complex science and history to life in ways accessible to learners of all ages. This will be the first OMSI-partnered project of its kind in rural Oregon—bringing world-class experiential education to a wildfire-impacted community. MRDC is working with Tribal scholars and cultural historians to ensure Indigenous lifeways are represented with accuracy, dignity, and voice. And through its partnership with OMSI, those stories won't just sit on panels. They will be experienced — through hands-on, science-based exhibits that connect river ecology, salmon, fire, and culture in ways visitors can see and feel.

The center celebrates the history of the McKenzie River drift boat — a craft born on this river and now known around the world. It was engineered for this river's hydraulics — its boulder gardens, swift current, and precise eddies. But that legacy is not guaranteed.

The master builders who carried this knowledge are aging. The stories, techniques, and river wisdom that shaped these boats can disappear if we fail to preserve them. The McKenzie River Discovery Center ensures that doesn't happen. Drift boat

building workshops have become a feature of the Discovery Center, offering hands-on boat building workshops that keep the craft alive. Through its partnership with OMSI, visitors will experience how river dynamics shaped boat design — seeing, touching, and understanding the evolution of this iconic boat within the context of watershed science and cultural history.

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! The project is already 54% funded through \$7 million in funds already raised. State investment will complete what the community has already started, delivering a first-of-its-kind Oregon environmental education center that honors our natural legacy while driving economic recovery where it's needed most.

I respectfully urge your support for this important investment in Oregon's future.

Respectfully,  
Nancy Ashley  
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