

## METRO 2021 LEGISLATIVE ISSUE IDENTIFICATION

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### **ISSUE:** Willamette Falls Locks

**BACKGROUND:** The Willamette Falls Locks were built in 1873 and purchased by the US Army Corps of Engineers in 1915. The Locks played a significant role in supporting the growth of Oregon's agriculture and timber economies by providing a means of low-cost access to world markets. With the listing of the spotted owl and salmonid species as endangered, traffic through the Locks dropped dramatically, leading to disinvestment by the Corps and closure for life-safety concerns in 2011.

In 2015, the Oregon Legislature adopted SB 131 establishing a Task Force to address the significance of the Locks. That Task Force reported back to the 2017 Legislature about the importance of repairing and reopening the Locks to the public. The Legislature then passed SB 256, which established a Commission to develop an approach to transfer ownership of the Locks from the Corps to another entity to enable repairs and a return to public service.

In 2017, a coalition of local governments (including Metro) and private sector partners contracted for an economic study to determine the state and regional benefits of repairing and reopening of the Locks. The [study](#) found expected economic benefits 2-3 times greater than the cumulative cost to repair and operate the Locks over a 30 year period.

Additionally in 2017-18, the Corps completed a "Disposition Study" and concluded that there is no further federal interest in owning the Locks due the lack of nationally significant economic benefit, and called for their disposal to a non-Corps entity. The Corps' preferred method of disposal is to transfer the facility to an entity that intends to make repairs and reopen the Locks to river travel. If no transferee is identified, the Corps' alternate plan is to permanently decommission the facility by replacing the upper gates with a concrete bulkhead.

In the 2019 and 2020 legislative sessions, the Willamette Falls Locks Commission and other partners including Metro pursued efforts to transfer ownership and secure funding to repair and reopen the Locks. Most recently, the Commission endorsed the formation of a public corporation to be the new owner of the Locks and oversee short-term repairs and long-term operations. In the 2020 session, a bipartisan bill authorizing this passed the House of Representatives unanimously but did not advance to a Senate vote due to the premature ending of session. Similarly, \$7.5 million in funding to support the Locks passed out of the Joint Ways and Means Committee, but the session collapsed prior to a chamber vote.

**RECOMMENDATION:** Support 2021 legislation establishing a public corporation to be the new owner of the Locks, and to oversee the repair, re-opening, and long-term ongoing operations of

the Locks. Continue to explore current and future funding opportunities for repair and re-opening costs.

**LEGISLATIVE HISTORY:** In 2006, the Locks were designated an Oregon Solutions project that led to a series of repairs and intermittent closings and reopenings while they were still in possession of the Army Corps of Engineers until their closure in 2011. In 2015, 2017 and 2019, the Legislature took successive steps towards transferring the Locks out of the hands of the Corps to another entity to facilitate its repair and reopening. This included studies, the creation of the Governor-appointed Willamette Falls Locks Commission to tackle the issue, and continued funding support. These efforts culminated in HB 4150 in 2020, which would have established the Willamette Falls Locks Authority as a public corporation to take ownership of the Locks and facilitate the necessary steps to reopening. However, the bill, as well as \$7.5 million in funding assistance, did not pass because of the premature ending of the session.

**OTHER INTERESTED PARTIES:** Numerous governments and non-governmental organizations have gone on record in support of repairing and reopening the Locks to the public including Clackamas, Multnomah, Marion, Polk and Linn Counties, Association of Oregon Counties, numerous cities ranging from Roseburg to Portland, the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, and a wide range of businesses and civic organizations.

**IMPACT IF PROPOSED ACTION OCCURS:** Action by the Legislature is a crucial step forward in a set of actions required to repair and reopen the Locks. Further action will be required including disposition by the Corps of Engineers, additional funding for repair, and establishment of an on-going funding source for operations.

Once the Locks are repaired and reopened, they would provide substantial public benefit including:

- **Disaster preparedness:** the Locks would serve as a critical transportation facility following large scale natural disasters like a Cascadia subduction zone earthquake.
- **Economic development:** the Locks would revitalize multiple cities' riverfront communities such as West Linn and Oregon City and spur possible tourism opportunities like river cruises.
- **Climate change:** The Locks would open up opportunities to barge commodities and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.