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Oregon Governor Kate Brown Establishes Commission to Determine Fate of 145-Year-Old Willamette Falls Locks

Recommissioning the Locks would bring significant economic, cultural and recreational benefits to the region's residents and businesses

WEST LINN, Ore.—Oregon Governor Kate Brown has appointed a 23-member Commission to oversee the potential recommissioning of the Willamette Falls Locks. Reopening the Locks would create millions of dollars in transportation and recreation benefits for Oregonians, return navigational access to the upper- and lower-Willamette River, reduce freight traffic from Portland roadways, and increase our region's resiliency to address future disasters such as the Cascadia earthquake.

Located on the Willamette River in West Linn, the Willamette Falls Locks are owned by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Locks opened in 1873, but were decommissioned and given a "non-operational status" in December 2011 due to failing gate anchors and expensive repairs. A lack of potential national economic benefit has prevented the Corps from justifying requests for federal funding to repair and reopen the Locks.

Options for the Willamette Falls Locks include: decommissioning the Locks, which would involve installing a concrete bulkhead to seal up the Locks, preventing future use by Oregonians; or transferring ownership of the Locks from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to a new owner, either private, public or a combination of both.

The Governor's appointed Commission will work to advise state, local and regional stakeholders on the development and implementation of policies relating to the repair, reopening, operation and maintenance of the Willamette Falls navigation canal and Locks. The Commission will also oversee transfer of ownership from the Corps, as well as the operation and financing of the navigation canal and Locks.

"This truly is the last opportunity to determine if the Locks will be part of the Willamette River's future," said West Linn Mayor and Commission Chair Russ Axelrod. "Repairing and reopening the Locks to river users has the potential to significantly impact local redevelopment and other communities along the river. I am very excited about the challenge before us and the opportunity to participate on this Commission, and I'm confident that we will be most successful in carrying out the Governor's directive."

According to a Local Economic Potential Study conducted by Portland-based ECONorthwest, Oregon would see tremendous economic benefits from recommissioning the Locks. The study found that over the next 30 years, there would be:

- Transportation benefits of \$12-\$49 million
- Recreation benefits of \$12-\$50 million
- 80,000-220,000 truck trips removed from Portland area roads

- 11,000-15,400 metric tons of nitrogen oxide reduced – which would contribute to cleaner air
- 11,000-32,000 metric tons of CO₂ reduced

Reopening the Locks and returning navigational access around Willamette Falls also holds tremendous historical and cultural value to Oregonians, and to the state’s Native American tribes. Tribal history in the area dates back at least 14,000 years, once serving as a place to collect food and fiber and to trade with other tribes, as well as a spiritual and ceremonial gathering place for members of the region’s tribes. Representatives from the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation and the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde are on the Commission.

Members of the Commission include elected officials, county and city representatives, community members, business owners, representatives from environmental groups, and tourism industry leaders, among others. Members include:

- Russ Axelrod, West Linn Mayor
- Joe Bernert, Clackamas County business and economic development representative
- Sam Brentano, Marion County Board of Commissioners
- Chad Brown, Environmental and ecological nonprofit representative
- Gary Burke, Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation
- Sandy Carter, Clackamas County resident representative
- Danielle Cowan, Clackamas County tourism and recreation representative
- MG Devereux, State Parks and Recreation Department
- Betty Dominguez, Metro Regional Government
- Jack Giffen Jr., Tribal Council Member, Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde
- Daniel Holladay, Oregon City Mayor
- Karen Homolac, Oregon Business Development Department
- Mark Meek, Oregon State Representative
- Alan Olsen, Oregon State Senator
- Julie Parrish, Oregon State Representative
- Bill Post, Oregon State Representative
- Stan Primozich, Yamhill County Board of Commissioners
- Andrea Salinas, Oregon State Representative
- Paul Scarlett, Oregon Department of Transportation
- Martha Schrader, Clackamas County Board of Commissioners
- Scott Starr, Wilsonville City Council
- Rob Wagner, Oregon State Senator

At the May 2 meeting, West Linn Mayor Russ Axelrod was selected to chair the Commission, and Clackamas County Commissioner Martha Schrader and West Linn Resident Sandy Carter were named co-vice chairs. The Commission will meet several times over the next two years to determine the best action plan for repair, reopening, operation and maintenance of the navigation canal and Locks. The next Commission meeting is scheduled for June 6 at West Linn City Hall.

More information about the Commission is available [online](#). Detailed information is available online about [SB 256](#), which the Oregon legislature passed in 2017 to establish the Willamette Falls Locks Commission.