

## **Make US 97 Safer - Our Lives Depend on It**

US 97, a thoroughfare for economic development and connecting the State of Oregon, is one of the most dangerous highways in our state. While HB 2017 supported some significant interchange and lane addition projects in select urban areas, those projects are largely complete now. ODOT has very limited discretionary funding to invest in STIP projects to make further improvements. For example, in the most recent three-year STIP cycle ODOT was only able to add 3 miles of passing lanes along US 97's 290 mile length.

The importance of this highway cannot be overstated. Not only is it a lifeline for commerce and our citizens, it is the most important highway in terms of state resiliency in the event of the Cascadia event or another catastrophic earthquake.

A coalition of leaders in Deschutes County, Klamath County, and Jefferson County urge the Joint Committee on Transportation and the Ways and Means Sub-Committees on Transportation and on Public Safety to make US 97 safety a top investment priority in 2026 and 2027. Once funds are available, the Oregon Transportation Commission (OTC), Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) and Oregon State Police (OSP) should implement safety improvements and operations immediately.

### **Why We Must Act Now**

Each year US 97 is the site of a large number of fatal and serious injury crashes. This number is increasing as the population of Central and South Central Oregon grows and as more freight and travelers choose this route. Each fatal and serious injury crash devastates families and burdens emergency services, law enforcement, and hospitals. Residents plead for improvements, echoing a broader crisis:

- US 97 had 77 fatal crashes statewide over five years (2016–2020), with 25 in 2020—making it the state's second deadliest road.
- Between 2018 and 2022, US 97 saw 97 deaths in 3,461 crashes
- 57.5% of fatal Oregon crashes happen on rural highways, including US 97.
- US 97's daily traffic is projected to exceed 20,000 vehicles by 2044, raising the risk for all travelers.
- From May 2023 to May 2025, DMV records show 17 fatalities along Klamath County's 120-mile stretch of US 97.
- The US 97 corridor between Madras and Bend ranks in the top 5% of dangerous road segments in Oregon.

### **The Safety Improvements We Need**

Designated Safety Corridors in other parts of Oregon provide useful principles for planning safety improvements on US 97. The key tools used by Safety Corridor projects are: Engineering, (Law) Enforcement, Education, and Emergency Response. Our requests to the Legislature primarily focus on Engineering, Law Enforcement and Education tools. Our Counties will work to enhance Emergency Response separately.

### ***Engineering***

We seek to partner with ODOT to make critical infrastructure improvements to US 97, including:

- Developing **median barriers or traversable medians** in frequent head-on collision and left turn onto highway sections
- Strategically adding and connecting **passing lanes and additional lanes** in areas of high congestion and dangerous passing activity
- **Widening shoulders** in key areas
- Redesign and construction of **dangerous intersections**
- Installing **shoulder and center line rumble strips and recessed pavement markers** to reduce lane deviations
- Developing **Clear Zone improvements** to reduce the probability and severity of roadway departures
- Implementing **best practices and technology** to assist enforcement and improve safety, such as the expanded use of variable speed limits, radar speed enforcement, and other emerging tools and technologies.

Once safety improvements have been made to US 97, adequate ongoing maintenance and preservation of the improved highway is also essential to safety.

### ***Law Enforcement***

More state troopers or other law enforcement officers could help to reduce the frequency and severity of crashes in key sections of US 97. Increased highway patrol presence could help manage dangerous driver behaviors such as speeding, distracted driving, DUII, and aggressive or unsafe passing. In some areas, improvements in traffic control signage would be appropriate to combine with increased law enforcement presence.

The Oregon State Police are supported by the state General Fund and appropriations are managed by the Public Safety Ways and Means Sub-committee. Prior to 1980 funding for OSP came from the State Highway Fund. Citation revenue goes to the General Fund to prevent OSP from having perverse incentives to issue lots of citations. We must consider moving beyond this philosophical and outdated funding barrier. In order for OSP to be able to provide expanded patrol on US 97 changes to this funding system may be needed.

### **Education**

A Safety Corridor approach relies upon the ability to influence driver behavior as well as adapt to changes that the Engineering and Enforcement activities have implemented. Education, in a variety of forms and approaches, will be necessary to inform and supplement the safety investment in the US 97 corridor.

### **Request For Legislative Action**

We request swift, effective action from the legislature to help reverse the tide of preventable losses on US 97. We have some of the most dangerous road segments in the State along US 97. In more rural areas where emergency response can be delayed the safety improvements we are seeking are even more critical.

There are numerous ways that the Legislature could make funding available to implement infrastructure upgrades, however it will take innovative bi-partisan work to develop viable funding strategies. Identifying funding to expand OSP presence on US 97 and beyond will also require creative problem solving. We hope to work with you to develop those creative bi-partisan solutions and stand ready to assist in whatever ways we can.