

Quasi-government agency would oversee Willamette Falls locks

By Peter Wong, Portland Tribune

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House bill would ease transfer from federal government and allow reopening after a decade.

A new quasi-government agency would take over the operation of the Willamette Falls locks in Oregon City, closed for most of the past decade, under a bill that won approval of the Oregon House.

A 54-3 vote on Tuesday, May 11, sent House Bill 2564 to the Senate. The bill would create a Willamette Falls Locks Authority, which would acquire the locks from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, operator of the locks from 1915 until 2011. The locks were named to the National Register of Historic Places in 1974, 101 years after the first locks were built to bypass the falls.

Since the locks closed in 2011 — the same year the Blue Heron paper mill shut down — governments and businesses have sought ways to redevelop the area for tourism, recreation and other purposes. The 2017 Legislature created a commission, which will end in mid-2022 under the bill and be replaced by an authority with a board of seven to 11 members appointed by the governor.

Rep. Mark Meek, D-Oregon City, is a nonvoting member of the current commission and a chief sponsor of the bill to create an authority, which will be similar to the status of Oregon Health & Science University and the Oregon State Fair.

"It will ensure that the locks remain a public asset to be used and enjoyed by all Oregonians," Meek said.

He said virtually all participants support the idea.

"They support this effort because they understand the huge cultural, environmental and economic value that reopening the locks will have on the region," he said. "Establishing the Willamette Falls Locks Authority and reopening the locks will help unlock the potential of the region and positively affect our area for years to come."

The commission's primary task was to draft a plan for reopening the locks.

Meek said more than \$900,000 has been amassed for the plan, and more than \$650,000 for work to make them operational again.

"That area is a little bit shoddy looking right now. It is kind of run down," Rep. Jeff Reardon, D-Happy Valley, said. "But we are looking at a point where with the continuation of these locks is going to incentivize further development on both sides of the river."

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde bought the 23-acre Blue Heron mill site in 2019. The tribe ceded the site to the U.S. government under a treaty in 1855, so its purchase reclaimed the land for the tribe. Earlier this year the tribe released its overall plans.

A long-awaited river walk will connect the falls with downtown Oregon City. Four governments — Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, Metro, Clackamas County and Oregon City —

have been working on it for years under the Willamette Falls Legacy Project. The project and the tribe have reached agreement on the first phase, which is estimated at \$12.5 million that has been collected already.

An overlook is planned for a second phase.

"This bill will be transformative for our state," Rep. Rachel Prusak, D-West Linn, said. "It will encourage tourism, expand transportation options, aid in disaster resiliency and preserve cultural and historical significance in this region."