



DISABILITY RIGHTS OREGON

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 7, 2018

MEDIA CONTACT: Elizabeth Seaberry
Communications Specialist
Disability Rights Oregon
Email: eseaberry@droregon.org
Phone: 503.243.2081
Mobile: 503.444.0026

Advocates applaud efforts to strengthen process for granting ADA exceptions for ODOT projects

Advocates request review of current projects granted an exception to federal accessibility rules

Portland, Oregon—Today, Oregon’s leading statewide disability rights organization asked the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) to review any project where an exception to the Americans with Disabilities Act’s (ADA) accessibility guidelines were granted. The request comes on the heels of ODOT reversing course, after local advocates voiced concern, and agreeing to make a historic Grants Pass bridge more accessible to pedestrians.

Disability Rights Oregon, in a letter to ODOT officials, recommended ways in which the agency could improve their process for evaluating and approving requests for historical exceptions to the ADA. The existing process does not require engineers to justify a conclusion that historical preservation overrules any changes to improve accessibility. By making these changes, ODOT could create a more stringent process for determining which renovation projects should be granted a historical exception to the ADA.

Under the ADA — a landmark civil rights law that went into effect 27 years ago — whenever the state makes alterations to a historic public facility, like a bridge, it should be made accessible “to the maximum extent feasible” consistent with the regulations. The historical exception process to the ADA permits some limited exemptions from the requirements. The goal is to retain historical features, while providing accessible routes for pedestrians.

“ODOT’s decision to make Caveman Bridge – a Grants Pass landmark – more accessible to pedestrians is great news for residents and visitors who experience mobility issues or use a wheelchair. Creating a more rigorous process for granting historical exceptions to the ADA is a promising first step. We’re hopeful that the agency will work toward ensuring all projects remove barriers for people with disabilities,” said Tom Stenson, litigation attorney with Disability Rights Oregon.

Last year, ODOT began work on major renovations of a Grants Pass landmark, the Caveman Bridge, which crosses the Rogue River. The bridge opened in 1931 as a gateway to California’s Redwood Empire, which attracts tourists from across the world. The bridge is among a dozen Oregon bridges designed by engineer Conde McCollough and prized for their architectural beauty.

Local disability rights advocates and members of the Grants Pass City Council unsuccessfully urged ODOT to widen the pedestrian routes on the urban bridge so that people who use wheelchairs no longer had to endure squeezing through the walkway and risk scraping their knuckles or bumping their elbows. The bridge — one of only three pedestrian routes across the Rogue River in the entire town of Grants Pass — provides an essential service to people living in the community. ODOT agreed to make the bridge more accessible to pedestrians.

“Connecting key parts of cities and towns to allow everyone access to grocery stores, doctor’s offices, and public spaces is crucial. Safe paths of travel for all Oregonians should be a given,” said Ted Wenk,

attorney with Disability Rights Oregon. “Whenever a public structure, like the Caveman Bridge, is altered, cities and the state are required to honor disability laws and ensure their communities are safe for everyone.”

To ensure future projects are as accessible as possible, DRO requested that ODOT create improved standards and protocols for when to grant exceptions to the ADA, including: an ADA-specific Design Exception Request form that addresses unique questions of ADA law; and require further approval from an engineer or Department of Justice attorney who has special expertise in accessibility law.

Accessibility Complaints

—Tell Disability Rights Oregon about any ODOT projects in your community that you’re concerned are not following ADA guidelines by filling out [this form](#).

—Report problems with access to ODOT by using this form: “[ADA Accessibility Requests](#)” [complaint form](#) on ODOT’s website.

Additional Resources

—Letter to ODOT from Disability Rights Oregon

—Video: ODOT [overview of Caveman Bridge renovation project](#)

About Disability Rights Oregon

Disability Rights Oregon upholds the civil rights of people with disabilities to live, work, and engage in the community. The nonprofit works to transform systems, policies, and practices to give more people the opportunity to reach their full potential. For 40 years, the organization has served as Oregon’s Protection & Advocacy system.

###