

Council Business Meeting

July 5, 2022

Agenda Item	Letter of Support – Oregon Department of Transportation America the Beautiful Challenge Grant Application	
From	Joseph Lessard	City Manager
Contact	Joe.lessard@ashland.or.us	

SUMMARY

Before the Council is a request to approve a letter of support for the America the Beautiful Challenge Grant. The grant application process being led by the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT), is for planning/engineering funds to develop designs for a new bridge crossing at Neil Creek within ODOT right of way. The final improvements will benefit fish passage and include a terrestrial path for all animals.

POLICIES, PLANS & GOALS SUPPORTED

N/A

PREVIOUS COUNCIL ACTION

The Council has previously approved letters of support for various grant applications.

BACKGROUND AND ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The America the Beautiful Challenge is a public-private grant program for locally led ecosystem restoration projects that invest in watershed restoration, resilience, equitable access, workforce development, corridors and connectivity, and collaborative conservation, consistent with the [America the Beautiful Initiative](#).

The America the Beautiful Challenge coordinates funding from multiple Federal agencies and private philanthropy into one competitive grant program. This streamlines the application process, enabling larger, more impactful cross-boundary projects, while making it easier for states, Tribes, territories, local groups, non-governmental organizations, and others to apply for multiple funds with one application. This one-stop-shop solicitation is the result of financial contributions from the Department of the Interior, Department of Agriculture, and Department of Defense, as well as private philanthropy.

In order to reduce the number of wildlife-vehicle collisions along I-5 and improve connectivity for fish and wildlife near the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, ODOT is requesting \$500,000 of America the Beautiful funds to design a replacement bridge for the existing Neil Creek culvert that will be suitable for native fish and wildlife.

The Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument in Southwest Oregon is the only monument set aside specifically for its biodiversity, which includes over 300 species of birds, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. Interstate 5 (I-5), a major north-south highway, bisects a portion of the monument and is a barrier to many species trying to access habitat on both sides of the highway. Each year, ODOT documents dozens of carcasses along I-5 as a result of vehicle strikes. Native chinook and steelhead are unable to swim through an existing culvert under the highway, even during ideal flow conditions. The Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife lists “Barriers to Animal Movement” as one of seven Key Conservation Issues (KCIs) outlined within Oregon’s State Wildlife Action Plan, the Oregon Conservation Strategy, which is the overarching state strategy for conserving Oregon’s fish and wildlife species (ODFW 2016).

FISCAL IMPACTS

The only City associated fiscal impacts for the letter of support are tied to the staff time necessary to bring the item forward for consideration.

For the proposed project ODOT will be requesting \$500,000 as part of the grant application and will provide \$1 million in matching funds with \$100K of the match coming from private sources. The total cost of the planning and engineering phase is estimated to be \$1.5 million.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends Council approve the letter of support.

ACTIONS, OPTIONS & POTENTIAL MOTIONS

I Move to approve the Mayor sign an American the Beautiful Wildlife Crossing Grant Application letter of support.

REFERENCES & ATTACHMENTS

Attachment #1: Letter of Support

Link: America the Beautiful Challenge Background: [Background Information](#)

July 15, 2022

J. Michael Cline,
Chair of the Board
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
1133 Fifteenth St. N.W., Suite 1000
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Mr. Cline,

Please accept this letter on behalf of the City of Ashland, Oregon, stating our support for the Oregon Department of Transportation's (ODOT) America the Beautiful Challenge \$500,000 grant entitled "Neil Creek Fish and Wildlife Passage Design Project" (#76914).

The newly designed Neil Creek underpass wildlife crossing would be on Interstate 5 (I-5) just five miles south of Ashland and would provide better fish passage for Chinook Salmon, Steelhead, Pacific Lamprey and Coho Salmon in addition to a new terrestrial wildlife passage at a critical location for wildlife migration. The current box culvert on Neil Creek is inadequate for fish migrations and the new design would allow fish to access 2 miles of new spawning habitat up-stream clean, cool water on U. S. Forest Service land. The completion of this project is also important because it will decrease vehicle-wildlife collisions on this section of I-5.

This project supports our local economy that traditionally has higher unemployment than both the state of Oregon and nation. We have just over 21,500 residents and have been hard hit in the past several years with wildfire and pervasive smoke for weeks during summer months. Ashland is home to the Oregon Shakespeare Festival which had to shut for two seasons because of COVID and smoke impacts, leading to two abysmal tourist seasons. The impact to our tourist economy has been severe both financially and emotionally. Our community is known for our outdoor lifestyle, proximity to the Pacific Crest Trail, love of fish and wildlife, and increasing concern for climate change impacts on habitat and animal movement. The Neil Creek Fish and Wildlife Passage Design Project supports both the culture and economy of our Ashland community.

Thank you for your fair consideration of this ODOT America the Beautiful Challenge grant. The City of Ashland fully supports the grant request and looks forward to working with ODOT to assure the planning and design are right-sized and meet the needs of our southern Oregon community and wildlife neighbors.

Sincerely,

City of Ashland Mayor
Julie Akins