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28 July 2020

Rian Windsheimer,
Oregon Department of Transportation
Portland Region Manager
123 NW Flanders St
Portland, OR 97209

Re: Public Transportation as an equity issue and reopening Multnomah Falls

Dear Rian Windsheimer:

I write this letter to you as a CAT Board Member and a local person of color who proudly serves our most vulnerable communities in the Columbia Gorge. My father and family have worked in agriculture and continue to help grow fruit in this valley for almost 40 years. I stay connected with our Latinx community and you should know that my letter speaks for thousands of people who do not have the privilege to write letters and serve on boards and participate in virtual meetings to speak about the need and the issues of transportation. CAT can offer safe transportation for our community members who in many cases are also essential workers and rely on public transportation.

The 2019 Community Health Needs Assessment reminds us that transportation is the highest unmet need as part of our built environment here in the Gorge. Data on diverse populations show that about one in five (19%) people cannot access basic needs such as healthcare or food because of transportation barriers. I joined the CAT Board of Directors in 2016 to help remind folks to please make sure and include public transportation in all plans. Public Transportation is a social determinant of health; it is highly necessary.

At this point however, the CAT Board feels that it is wise to ask for further clarification from ODOT on its long-term strategy at Multnomah Falls and along I-84 in the Gorge. We believe this clarification and understanding by the Board can help our agency be better partners, allow us to support your long-term objectives as well as ensure the Board is able to make informed financial decisions on CAT's long-term involvement in regional transit service in the corridor.

To that end we would like to invite you to come to our September 16th Board meeting to address some of the questions outline below. We hope to have an open discussion with you about your strategy, our role and the goals of our joint ODOT/CAT partnership.



1. Conversations with ODOT staff have led us to believe that long-term strategy for Exit 31 is to either close the exit entirely to personal vehicles or restrict access through a paid parking permit system. The reason given for this type of closure is the safety issues (particularly travelling eastbound) as they relate to the left side off ramp. Staff has also assured us that Transit will play an exceedingly important role in providing visitor access to the Falls, the Waterfall corridor and to the communities along the I-84.
 - Can you clarify for me and the board that this is the long-term plan/strategy for this exit and transit access in the Corridor? If it is not, can you clarify for me what plan or vision you have for this exit and the role, if any, that you envision transit will play in the corridor in the future?
2. Further, I would like to remind you that the closure of Multnomah Falls is the second such emergency event in this corridor in the past three years (Eagle Creek Fire in 2017 and COVID closure in 2020). The data and science suggest that with Climate Change, growth in the Portland area, extreme weather and other such events are likely to increase the frequency of and need for emergency closures, critical access restrictions and crowd limitation in the Multnomah Falls and surrounding Gorge areas. All of which are likely to place an additional resource burden those involved in managing transportation in these areas
 - CAT wonders if there are advantages to ODOT to begin looking toward the future (e.g. building a better future) by investing in the technology, signage, parking permit systems or infrastructure necessary to control and better manage such events in the Gorge both in the day to day as well as in an emergency response situation? Embedded in this question is how, if at all, can CAT be a good partner with you to ensure we are moving toward this future?
3. Finally, while CAT understands these issues are complex and there are differing needs and strong partnerships and voices that need to be considered and heard, we are also aware that often inaction is a way to maintain the status quo. In this case, the Gorge has a status quo that was built long-ago on the idea that the those with cars control access to the recreational and businesses needs of visitors, residents and employers within the Gorge. Fortunately, or unfortunately, that historical backdrop is crumbling (literally) and a new vision, one that promotes, environmentally friendly, equitable and safe access to visitors while offering new and increased travel, economic development and housing opportunities for local businesses and residents is emerging.
 - What is ODOT's goal in corridor to ensure an environmentally friendly, equitable and viable access for all those who long to travel, visit, recreate and do businesses in the Gorge and how can CAT help to play a role?



We appreciate your time and consideration and look forward to an informed dialog that can strengthen our partnership.

Respectfully,

Leticia Valle

Leticia Valle
Secretary and Board Member for the Hood River County Transportation District
(dba Columbia Area Transit)