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Elliott Forest, Roseburg veterans home make the state bonding list

CARISA CEGAVSKE Senior Staff Writer The News-Review Jul 5, 2017



The State Lands Board will discuss options for the Elliott State Forest at its upcoming meeting.

COURTESY OF JOE METZLER/



Kruse

The state Legislature’s Ways and Means Committee approved a list of projects to receive state capital construction bond dollars on Monday. It includes \$100 million for the Elliott Forest, \$8.1 million for Umpqua Community College and \$10.5 million for a local match for a new veterans’ home in Roseburg.

The Elliott Forest package, part of Gov. Kate Brown’s effort to keep the forest under state ownership, drew the ire of local legislators. Sen. Jeff Kruse, R-Roseburg, said he wasn’t happy about it.



“Quite honestly, it’s a gift to the environmental community, who would prefer we never cut another tree,” Kruse said.

Heard

He also said adding in the \$100 million in bonds meant taking away bond dollars from universities and community colleges, including UCC, whose share for its Industrial Arts Building dropped from a requested \$10 million to \$8.1 million.

The Elliott Forest had been up for sale until Brown introduced her most recent plan to keep it under public ownership. Lone Rock Resources and the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians had offered \$220.8 million for it. The land was originally set aside to generate timber revenues for the Common School Fund.

Rep. Dallas Heard, R-Winston, said it made no sense to sell bonds to pay for land the state already owns.

“That’s the single dumbest thing we could do,” he said.

Cascadia Wildlands Executive Director Josh Laughlin greeted the news favorably, however. In a written statement he said that privatization would have reduced public access and increased clearcutting of older forests.

“The fireworks and celebration started early this year. The outcome of today’s vote is a testament to the will of Oregonians who spoke loud and clear about the importance of keeping the Elliott State Forest in public ownership,” he said.

The last-minute addition of the veterans’ home bond dollars was greeted favorably by both Kruse and Heard.

Heard worked hard to get the veterans home on the bond list.

“I’m very pleased. I feel very blessed God gave us another opportunity on that,” he said.

A few years ago, a new veterans home for Roseburg was at the top of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs’ list, with a 300-bed home planned for Oregon. The project was split in two, and a 150-bed facility was built in Lebanon.

The plans to house the remaining 150 beds in a Roseburg home faltered. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, believing Oregon had no matching funds, dropped the Roseburg home from first place to near the bottom of 100 projects on its priority list. State legislators, seeing the ranking so low, balked at putting the project, which had previously been on the lottery bond list, on the capital construction bond list this year.

Heard credited Douglas County Commissioner Tim Freeman with finding the source of the problem. Heard said Freeman discovered from a contact in Washington, D.C., that the Oregon Department of Veterans Affairs failed to file the paperwork with the feds indicating that Oregon had approved matching funds.

Heard said he never begged and screamed so hard for anything as he did for getting the veterans home on the list. He also credited Speaker of the House Tina Kotek, a Democrat, with being willing to listen and to back the restoration of the veterans home to the list.

Heard said he and Rep. Paul Evans, D-Salem, will head to Washington, D.C., in September to plead their case at the federal VA for restoring the project to the top of the VA's list.

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