

February 9, 2023

ODOT Coalition Opening Statement

Award winning African American author Octavia Butler wrote that, “the only lasting truth is change.” And certainly, we have all seen a lot of change in these last few years.

Oregon, like our country and the rest of the world, is struggling with enormous challenges. We all know that grocery bills are higher and gas prices are volatile. Our communities are increasingly threatened by catastrophic fires, we are collectively recovering from an unprecedented pandemic, and the increased stress to find a work/life balance is palpable all around us.

What remains steady though is that Oregon’s frontline workers are at this table because we believe in public service and take pride in making Oregon work.

Safety remains our top concern. Employees need to have a safe environment to perform their duties. Our coalition has many employees who perform dangerous jobs every single day, and they need to know that management is willing and able to protect them.

We have employees on dangerous roads, cleaning toxic materials at homeless camps, being threatened by people whose property they have to enter, enduring hostile threats from citizens within our offices. We have customers following us to our cars, threatening us with guns and other weapons, sicking dogs on us and other threats of violence. Many of us also face threats to our safety by being sent to remote, outdoor work locations in inclement weather, alone, in places where there is no method of communication available. An employee could be attacked, or even fall and be injured, and have no way of summoning help. And some of us go toward the fire to help people evacuate from disastrous events that are burning down our towns.

We face these risks because Oregonians need people to plow roads, respond to dangerous situations on the freeway, maintain the signs that allow safe passage, and fix bridges.

We face these risks because Oregonians need a system to regulate safe driving on our roads so that we and our loved ones can arrive home in one piece.

We face these risks because Oregonians need a workforce to protect our homes and forests from increasingly catastrophic wildfires.

We face these risks because Oregonians love and value our fish and wildlife and we want them to thrive for future generations.

We face these risks because Oregonians love our natural world and enjoy making memories from Smith Rock to Harris Beach, and from the Blue Mountains to Fort Stevens.

We face these risks because Oregonians deserve a healthy agricultural industry and safe food.

We face these risks because Oregonians need and want clean water.

And we face these risks because Oregonians are safer when we know about and are prepared for tsunamis, landslides, earthquakes and floods.

Our employees are on the frontlines to make sure Oregon remains the wonderful place it is to live, work and raise a family.

We look forward to working together at this table to make our agencies better and our workers safer and healthier.

We want to address the recruitment and retention problem that has plagued our agencies in recent years. Not only are we losing good people because wages are not keeping up with inflation, but the folks that remain are overloaded and burning out.

Our employees need adequate tools to perform their work. We need safety goggles, vests, protection against the elements with quality rain gear, snow gear, and perhaps most importantly boots.

We also need to address new and evolving threats by examining and modernizing past assumptions. Is the customer always right when they are rude, hostile and threatening to a state worker? What kind of self-defense is appropriate when we send state workers out into the field to approach people potentially engaged in illegal activities, or working in the woods with bears?

Some of these issues will be easier to solve than others, but we enthusiastically meet you at this virtual table with the best of intentions to tackle hard things and make improvements for the state employees that make Oregon work.