

TO: Board of Commissioners

FROM: Chris Ogren, Administrative Services Intern

DATE: June 6, 2018

SUBJECT: Harper Bridge

For decades, South County's Harper Bridge river access has been a popular destination for locals and visitors to access and float the Deschutes River. Its popularity, combined with a lack of formal established parking, has caused traffic congestion and parking issues on Spring River Road and has created concern over pedestrian safety, degradation of the riverbank and trespassing on nearby private property. This memorandum and attached report provide a comprehensive history of the site, including previous efforts to address public safety concerns and offers a number of alternative courses of action for the Board's consideration in moving forward.

## BACKGROUND

Harper Bridge is located on Spring River Road, southwest of Sunriver. It spans the Deschutes River as it flows north toward Bend. Watercraft launch on the east side of the bridge from the county-owned right of way on both the northern and southern edges. Trailers launch from the unimproved area on the southern edge on land made available by Crosswater as part of its 1994 land use approval. Outside of the right of way, land ownership is privately held on both sides of the bridge and on both sides of Spring River Road – see map below.



Parking occurs along the shoulder right of way on both sides of Spring River Road, often in an uncontrolled and haphazard manner. After parking, pedestrians walk along the road to the river carrying their watercraft and/or accessories, and occasionally cross the road to the launch area on the other side. The combination of high volumes of pedestrians, uncontrolled parking, and traffic have created a dangerous situation. Although there have been no known fatalities or injuries, there have been anecdotal accounts of near-misses. The danger is more acute on busy summer weekends, when more than 100 parked vehicles have been counted in the area.

## **PREVIOUS EFFORTS**

In 2009, the Community Development Department (CDD) began looking for alternative sites for people to access the river near Harper Bridge. At the request of the Board, CDD convened local stakeholders, who formed the Harper Bridge Citizen Committee. The committee conducted stakeholder interviews and reviewed seven alternative launch sites (Exhibit 1). Shortly after the committee's review began, Sunriver Resort closed their boat launch to the public. The Harper Bridge boat launch experienced an immediate increase in use.

The committee presented their findings to the Board of Commissioners in 2011:

- The review committee recommended a nearby private property known as the Brynwood site as a viable option for an alternative launch point. However, CDD, ODFW and DSL staff identified numerous permitting and land use challenges related to potential development of the site, including but not limited to: (1) a restriction on additional development due to the approved cluster development; (2) a conservation easement; (3) mapped wetlands. The property owner offered to build a public boat launch in exchange for county approval to build an RV park on the property. Developing a public boat launch and RV Park would require amending Deschutes County Code and modifying this cluster development approval or pursuing another regulatory approach. Any land use path toward approval of these uses would be a matter of first impression for an approved cluster development in Deschutes County. The Federal Endangered Species Act may also apply due to the spotted frog habitat impacts.
- The stakeholder committee also reviewed other sites, including three locations within Deschutes River Recreation Homesites (DRRH) and three public sites. The alternative locations also presented challenges. The DRRH launch would require approval by DRRH homeowners, and many voiced concern about the potential project. Developing the public sites (Spring River or Besson) would be difficult since the U.S. Forest Service owns the land and parking facilities at each location are not large enough to accommodate the number of cars parked at Harper Bridge. Accessing these more remote sites is also a challenge.

In 2012, the Sunriver Owner's Association (SROA) discussed with the County a concept whereby the County would lease land on the northeast side of the bridge for development of an improved parking

lot/launch facility. In lieu of lease payments, SROA proposed that the County build a second boat launch exclusively for Sunriver residents and guests. An agreement on this concept ultimately was not achieved.

More recently, the Road Department has worked to improve safety on Spring River Road by installing warning signs, rumble strips, parallel parking only signs and by implementing seasonal reduced speed limits with radar-activated 'your speed' displays. While these steps have helped reduce the risk for pedestrian-vehicle interaction, the continued increase in the popularity of Harper Bridge makes it very difficult to completely eliminate the potential for a serious incident. The sound generated by the permanent (groove cut) rumble strips is of concern to the Crosswater Homeowners Association, both in terms of impact on nearby residents as well as possible impacts on an eagle nest in the area.

Local stakeholders, such as the Sunriver Chamber of Commerce and the Upper Deschutes River Coalition, continue to be involved in possible solutions, and recently have asked for the County's participation in discussions with Deschutes National Forest on a concept for a new launch facility west of Spring River. County staff have continued to work cooperatively with any individuals or groups that have ideas to provide a safe boat launch.

## **OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**

The following options are presented for discussion, with the request that the Board provide direction to staff on next steps.

### **1. Status Quo**

Take no further steps at this time. This option recognizes the popularity of the Harper Bridge site, and the benefit it provides for recreation. By preserving the current status, the Board would find that public safety risks are adequately addressed by the traffic safety measures that have been implemented.

### **2. Partial Closure - Limited Parking**

This option would involve constructing improved but limited parallel parking on both sides of Spring River Road, along with an established loading zone. Pavement would be widened in order to establish safer areas for parking and pedestrian traffic. A bike line on each side would provide a buffer between traffic movement and parking areas. Although the number of spaces to be built is flexible, staff have created a concept for 50 parking stalls, which would limit the number of people who can use the site at one time. A slope easement may be required from the Crosswater HOA in order to fit the concept in the existing right of way. Parking beyond the improved area would be strictly prohibited with signage, and enforcement assistance would be sought from both the Sheriff's Office and Sunriver Police. Expected cost is approximately \$200,000. Funding could come from the County's Park Development Fund.

### **3. Partial Closure - Loading Zone Only**

With the exception of improved loading zones adjacent to Harper Bridge, parking on Spring River Road would be strictly prohibited with signage, and enforcement assistance would be sought from both the Sheriff's Office and Sunriver Police. Users would need to find parking elsewhere, likely in adjoining neighborhoods, at the Sunriver Business Park or elsewhere. Estimated cost is \$30,000 to \$50,000 for improved (paved) loading zone areas on both sides of the road and associated signage. For unimproved loading areas (signage only), cost is estimated at \$5,000. One potential idea is for the County to work with a private vendor to operate a shuttle service between a designated parking area (e.g., Three Rivers School in summer) and Harper Bridge.

#### **4. Complete Closure**

While likely to be very unpopular with river users, tourism groups, and others, complete closure of the Harper Bridge launch site would severely limit the possibility of a tragic pedestrian accident. In pursuing this option, the Board would recognize that no other options exist for mitigating public safety risks. This option would force users to use other launch sites, including Big River Boat launch upstream, the Forest Service Besson site downstream on the west side of the river, and the Sunriver Resort and SROA facilities downstream on the east side. Some users may attempt to access the river illegally on private property. Parking anywhere on Spring River Road near Harper Bridge would be strictly prohibited with signage (estimated at \$5,000) and potential physical barriers. Enforcement would be essential for this option to succeed, and assistance would be sought from both the Sheriff's Office and Sunriver Police.

#### **5. Continue to Pursue Launch Facilities with Other Landowners**

As detailed in the report, public launch facilities have been discussed in the past with SROA , Crosswater, the Brynwood property ownership, and many others. For varying reasons including cost, land use and environmental regulations and the lack of a willing or interested landowner(s), these efforts have not been successful. However, if the Board is willing to make funding and staff resources available to explore and reach out to additional landowners to explore opportunities, staff can pursue this option further.

### **BOARD DIRECTION**

Staff seeks Board direction at this meeting on one of the following options:

- Pursue one of the listed options above
- Continue discussion to a later date – the Board may request additional information
- Schedule a public hearing – a number of stakeholders are keenly interested in the future of Harper Bridge, and the Board may desire to allow public input on these or other options for consideration