

Milton-Freewater's Highway 11 to get state police presence

By BERIT THORSON East Oregonian Mar 4, 2024 Updated Mar 11, 2024 0



Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, addresses the crowd's grievances on Highway 11 safety Dec. 13, 2023, at a town hall meeting in the Milton-Freewater Community Building. Oregon State Police have recently said they will increase patrolling in the area, meeting one of the requests from the community.

[Buy Now](#)

Yasser Marte/East Oregonian, File

MILTON-FREEWATER — Oregon State Police will start patrolling the dangerous section of Highway 11 that instigated a town hall meeting in Milton-Freewater at the end of last year.

A few months after Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, hosted a listening session in Milton-Freewater in response to community concerns about the highway stretching toward the state line, Oregon State Police confirmed it will increase its presence in the area.

“The OSP Pendleton Office is assigning available troopers to work the Milton-Freewater area on a daily basis unless other priorities dictate their response and resource elsewhere,” wrote OSP

Capt. Kyle Kennedy in a letter to Rep. Tawna Sanchez, D-Portland, co-chair of the Legislature's Joint Committee on Ways and Means.

“There's a great sense of appreciation to the folks in Milton-Freewater for, one, raising the issue, and two, during that meeting, bringing forward viable solutions,” Smith said in response to the decision. “They're the ones who really brought the solution forward and then my job was to try to implement their solution.”

Smith said he worked with other state legislators as well as state police and the Oregon Department of Transportation to enact this first step in the solution. He said he was pleased state police and ODOT are coming together to take the situation seriously.

Although the presence will increase, Kennedy also said the Pendleton location has five openings it is trying to fill. Around nine people are stationed in Pendleton.

The police are planning to conduct “saturations” in the area, meaning they will increase patrolling to decrease poor driving behaviors with the goal of better traffic safety. Kennedy said OSP is working with the Milton-Freewater Police Department, the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office and the Washington State Patrol to add more patrols on both sides of the state border.

Beyond more patrols, Kennedy wrote, “OSP has engaged with community members at a public forum to better help understand their concerns and explain OSP's capabilities and limitations of traffic enforcement and their desired increase for traffic safety.”

The forum was the town hall Smith hosted in December.

“I think the community spoke up, they came up with a solution,” Smith said, “and working together, hopefully we're bringing some resolve to this issue.”

State police also have discussed the Highway 11 issues with the Oregon Department of Transportation, according to Kennedy.

“While speed is undoubtedly a contributing factor,” he said, “local troopers report vehicles failing to yield right of way or safely enter the highway to be more problematic than speed.”

The section of the highway just north of Milton-Freewater has many entry and exit points directly along the road, which OSP has identified as major contributors to the number of accidents in the area. ODOT will be working on possible physical changes to the highway that could decrease the likelihood and frequency of accidents.

“When (the highway) was engineered and then built, population growth and the safety need that comes with it was not really taken into consideration,” Smith said, “so Highway 11 has all these stinking driveways, so people are pulling right out of their home onto a highway at 55 miles an hour.”

The long-term solution, then, will be to reengineer the highway. Smith said he expects a “significant investment” from ODOT to make that redesign happen. There also will need to be full community buy-in and engagement, he said, because the state can’t just change people’s access to their homes.

Moving forward, Smith said, he will take part in the process of highway redesign, working alongside the department of transportation and the state police.

“At the end of the day, the Legislature is going to have to pay for that, and so I want to make sure that I’m part of that process,” he said, “and that will give me an opportunity to stay engaged and make sure this is really getting done.”

But for now, the increased police presence should hopefully help suppress the speeds people drive at on the road.

“We believe the above factors collectively will have an impact on increasing traffic safety,” Kennedy said.