



# Oregon

Tina Kotek, Governor

## Parks and Recreation Department

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Dear Sitka Sedge State Natural Area neighbors and friends,

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department (OPRD), interested parties, and partners have been working for the last 9 years to find a solution to issues related to Beltz Dike at Sitka Sedge State Natural Area. The dike's tide gate, which historically prevented tidewater from entering the marsh behind the dike and so unintentionally created a mixed fresh/saltwater marsh, is no longer functional. For many years, incoming tide water has streamed through the culvert, and the fast-moving waters have caused serious damage to the culvert and the dike. The dike will not last in the long run, so action is needed to resolve the situation. Finding a course of action that meets the department's goals for the site has been complicated and controversial. **OPRD selected a setback dike as its preferred solution in 2020, and this position has not changed.**

Several goals set the sideboards for finding a solution that was acceptable according to OPRD's sense of public stewardship. While it may not be possible to find a solution that perfectly fulfills every goal and that pleases everyone interested in the result, we are trying to find one that comes as close as possible. The goals that guide our work are:

- 1) The design should result in virtually no increase in tide water, stormwater, or elevated groundwater on private properties in Tierra Del Mar.
- 2) The design should result in meaningful improvements to estuary and fish habitats in the area inside the existing dike.
- 3) The design should restore fish passage to the mouths of Reneke and Beltz Creeks.
- 4) Recreational access across the marsh should allow visitors to see the marsh up close, reach the beach, and enjoy the diverse coastal environments in between.
- 5) The design should route Reneke Creek to the marsh naturally, rather than in an artificially constructed and channelized path near the parking area (that would enter the marsh on private property to the north), or along the roadside Sand Lake Road ditch to the south.

After several years of hydrology study looking into surface water and groundwater effects of various alternatives for modifying the dike, OPRD brought together a technical team of reviewers in 2019 to assess the merits of four alternatives:

- 1) a no-action alternative for reference and comparison;
- 2) constructing a modern muted tidal regulator tide gate in the existing dike;
- 3) a simple breach; and
- 4) constructing a setback dike to control tides near Tierra Del Mar, and then breaching the old dike to restore most of the marsh to a natural marine-influenced estuary.

The diverse team of reviewers included scientists, regulators, OPRD, and Tierra Del Mar representatives working together for several months to look at the options from all angles. The team weighed the alternatives from diverse perspectives that included high-level feasibility, water quality, ecology, biology, finances, permitting, hazards, community, private property, engineering, and recreation.

In winter and Spring of 2020, OPRD staff presented summaries of the alternatives to interested parties, the Tillamook County Commissioners, the Oregon State Parks and Recreation Commission, and OPRD leadership. **In Spring 2020, OPRD officially selected the setback dike alternative as the preferred option.** This alternative provided the compromise that best



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met all of the diverse goals. The Tierra Del Mar Community Association contributed a letter of support, and OPRD staff began to develop funding strategies and timelines to move forward. And then COVID happened. Agency staff capacity and funding evaporated. The project lost steam, and moving forward with analysis and design required grant funding. Tillamook Estuaries Partnership (TEP) partnered with OPRD and we got grants to proceed with design. Even though work has restarted, it is clear that the last three years have made it hard to keep people aware of the collaboration and partnership that led up to the 2020 decision.

**OPRD's decision to prefer a setback dike alternative still stands.** We still believe this option is the best fit for our goals and commitments. Unfortunately, a recent presentation on the ongoing conceptual design work by TEP's consultant led some people to believe that OPRD was "pulling a bait and switch" and had changed its mind without telling anyone. The consultant hired by TEP found potential difficulties with a setback dike's feasibility that led them to suggest a new alternative—raising Roma Avenue and Sand Lake Road in lieu of a more traditional setback dike further north—but **OPRD has rejected this option.** We discovered the consultant was working on this option at the May meeting (videos of TEP meetings are online at <https://www.youtube.com/TillamookEstuaries/videos>). We have since reiterated our intent to pursue a setback dike option, sticking with our decision in 2020, and the consultant will resume exclusive focus on a traditional setback dike.

**OPRD will not change course without a good reason.** If for some reason a traditional setback dike is unattainable, we will start a new and transparent process with public input to find a new alternative that fits our goals. There is currently no indication that a traditional setback dike will be unbuildable, but we acknowledged in 2020, and still do today, that reality can stymie even the best-intentioned plans. What could change our mind about a setback dike? Soils that are not strong enough to support a dike, regulations that will not allow permitting a new structure in this location, or astronomical cost. Design has now reached a stage where we can answer these questions within the next few months.

OPRD is committed to fair and honest collaboration and communication. We still have some unknowns in front of us, and will continue to work through any surprises with you. We will continue to hold technical team and town hall meetings to keep people informed, and to collaborate in finding solutions when we encounter obstacles.

With regards,

Lisa Sumption, Director, OPRD

Cc:

Noel Bacheller, OPRD Botanist

Chris Parkins, OPRD Central Park Resources Manager

Dennis Comfort, OPRD Coast Region Director

Justin Parker, OPRD North Coast District Manager

Matt Rippee, OPRD Deputy Director for Field Services

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Kristi Foster, Tillamook Estuaries Partnership

Mary Faith Bell, Tillamook County Commission

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