



Washington State House of Representatives
Representative Joel Kretz
House Deputy Republican Leader
7th Legislative District

Dear Honorable Transportation Chair Fey and Ranking Member Barkis,

I am writing to submit a transportation budget request for **a critical public safety project to save lives on Highway 97** in rural Okanogan County. Between Riverside and Tonasket, more than 350 vehicle-deer collisions occur every year in just 12.5 miles of Highway 97. Medical costs, car repairs, Washington State Patrol and Sheriff's Department response and WSDOT clean-up crews all add up to approximately \$6,500 per accident, costing the public more than \$2.5 million every year. If nothing is done, it is only a matter of time before there is a human fatality on this dangerous stretch of highway.

Using \$260,000 in funds donated by concerned citizens around the state, in 2019 Conservation Northwest, the Mule Deer Foundation and the Colville Confederated Tribes began to address this urgent issue by renovating Janis Bridge to serve as a wildlife undercrossing and installing the first mile of deer fencing along Highway 97 south of the bridge to the intersection with Highway 7.

Already, hundreds of animals have used the new undercrossing to avoid dangerous collisions with motorists, including mule deer, cougars, bobcats and other species. But state funding is needed to complete the Safe Passage 97 project.

Phase one of the project would continue fencing, necessary cattle-guards, gates, deer escapes and three wildlife underpasses to complete another 4.25 miles of protected highway south to Crumbacher Road, which is expected to prevent more than 139 vehicle-deer collisions per year. The second phase of the project would extend an additional 4.3 miles from South Crumbacher Road to just north of the town of Riverside, including three more wildlife undercrossings and fencing, and would prevent an additional 105 vehicle deer collisions per year.

This stretch of Highway 97 is an important freight corridor, commuting route, and facilitates tourism throughout Okanogan County. This area is also an important travel route and habitat for mule deer. Importantly, this project aligns with Washington state's adopted "Target Zero" goal to reduce human fatalities and serious injuries on Washington's roadways to zero by the year 2030.

There is tremendous support for this project from a broad array of groups, including the City of Omak, Okanogan County Commissioners, the Colville Confederated Tribes, Freight Mobility Strategic Investment Board, Central Washington Latino Community Fund, Okanogan Tourism Council, conservation groups, and dozens more. Support letters for this project are included. Thank you kindly for considering this important public safety project for rural Washington.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Joel Kretz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.