



Municipal Elevator

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History of the Oregon City Municipal Elevator

In Oregon City's early years, most of the city was located on the "first level" along the Willamette River. As the city grew, it became apparent that an easier way needed to be found to travel to the upper levels of the town. By 1867, steps were built up the bluff to supplement early Native American trails used by city residents. More steps were constructed over the years, but the climb was still difficult because the preferred route had 722 steps from the base of the cliff to the top of the bluff.

On May 10, 1912, the City Commission decided to place before the voters a ballot measure asking if the City should be authorized to issue bonds for "A Public Elevator at the Bluff." The first vote on funding a public elevator was defeated on July 8, 1912. Considered again on December 2, 1912, the voters authorized \$12,000 in bonds "to construct and operate an elevator from the lower to the upper town at some point to be selected."

A committee of City Commissioners was appointed to "investigate the elevator proposition." Most city residents thought an elevator was a great idea; however, none of the wealthier residents who lived on the bluff wanted the elevator near their property. By March, 1913, negotiations had started to acquire access between 6th and 7th Streets for the upper portion of the elevator. The owner of the property objected to locating the elevator in front of her residence and refused to sell access to the City. The City took the matter to the State Supreme Court and the Court decided in the City's favor. The property owner remained opposed to the elevator and never did ride on it.

The City surveyed and platted the vertical "Elevator Street" and entered into a contract with Oregon Bridge and Construction Company to construct the elevator. The elevator could be operated by either electricity or water power. Water power was cheaper than electricity, but the City's Water Board refused to allow the connection, fearing the elevator would diminish the integrity of the water system. The City Commission resolved the matter by removing and appointing a new Water Board composed of City Commissioners. The issue went to court and the elevator committee was instructed to procure water from the Water Board to operate the elevator.

After years of discussion and conflict, the elevator, constructed of steel and wood, was placed into service on December 3, 1915, a day on which almost the entire population of Oregon City (3,869 persons) rode the elevator. The 89-foot ride to the top involved a wheezing, jerking three to five minutes. Once at the top, it was necessary to cross a 35-foot catwalk that bridged the two sides of the city high above the chasm. When the elevator worked, it generally lowered the water pressure in the surrounding area. When it didn't work, passengers had to wiggle out of a trap door and down a narrow ladder.

By 1924, the hydraulic power was replaced by electricity and the ride was reduced to 30 seconds. Dependability increased with the switchover and the elevator became the preferred method of pedestrian travel. By the 1950's, breakdowns became much more frequent and it was determined that a new elevator was needed to replace the wooden structure.

The City Commission approved a resolution to study the feasibility and costs for a new elevator. A total of \$7,000 was spent planning the structure that, under City Commission direction, was to be "as plain as possible without adornment." A special election in May, 1952 authorized bonds for \$175,000 to build a new elevator. Bids were received in November, 1953; however, the low bid was over \$200,000 so all bids were rejected.

In January, 1954, the firm of Stevens and Thompson submitted a new design proposal that could be built within the bond amount. The new design produced a low bid of \$116,000 and a contract was awarded to James and Yost, Inc. The new elevator was dedicated on May 5, 1955, and the City Commission accepted it on July 13, 1955. At that time, 2,000 elevator passes were printed. Even though the elevator ride has always been free, the distribution of these passes as a keepsake has continued as a City tradition. The existing elevator took over 751 tons of concrete and steel to construct, is 130 feet high, and passengers can zip to the top in 15 seconds. Additionally,



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passengers now walk through a 35-foot long tunnel under the tracks rather than over the tracks.

The Oregon City Municipal Elevator continues to operate as one of only four municipal elevators in the world and "Elevator Street" remains the only "vertical street" in North America.

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