

Washington, D.C. — Congressman Earl Blumenauer (D-Ore.) proposed legislation last week, H.R. 2927, “The Orphan Highway Restoration Act,” to authorize funding for repair and rehabilitation of the nation’s “orphan highways,” many of which function as Main Streets in communities throughout the nation. Orphan highways are federal routes that served as major thoroughfares before the advent of the Interstate Highway System, but now suffer from neglect and maintenance needs.

“Investing in orphan highways creates a major opportunity for economic redevelopment, safety improvements, and enhancing community livability,” said Blumenauer. “With targeted funding and greater decision-making directed to urban areas where the impacts are most directly felt, we can have a positive impact on efforts to reinvigorate tired old highways and restoring the Main Streets so important to our nation’s communities.”

Blumenauer’s proposal would authorize \$500 million over six years for maintenance and repair of travel lanes, sidewalks, and bike paths as well as the construction of traffic calming devices, such as traffic circles and speed bumps, and other enhancements. Under the bill, a road would qualify as an orphan highway if it was a designated federal route that predated the Interstate system. Many of these, like US Route 1 or US Route 26, now function as Main Streets through communities with struggling downtowns.

State departments of transportation tend to neglect orphan highways because of their diminished importance to statewide transportation needs. However, these roadways continue to function as the Main Streets of many smaller towns and cities and are vital to these communities’ livability. Increased federal investment in these highways can be an important catalyst for economic development and revitalization.

In the Portland region, Sandy Boulevard, Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard, Grand Avenue, and SW Pacific Highway are all examples of orphan highways.

Blumenauer hopes to have his orphan highways bill included in legislation authorizing highway and transit projects for the next six years, which is due for consideration in Congress this year.