



News Release

Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation

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Kayak Public Transit is Honored with Two Statewide Awards

Mission, OR – On Tuesday August 15th, Oregon Transit Association will award Kayak Public Transit with two recognitions. Susan and Robert Johnson are jointly awarded the 2023 Distinguished Service Award, and Martin Ritchey is awarded 2023 Transit Driver of the Year Award.

Susan and Robert Johnson retired from Kayak Public Transit in 2023 and 2022, respectively, after dedicating a combined 31 years of service to making Kayak Public Transit a world-class rural transit network. Susan helped build the transit system from the ground up, beginning in 2001, as administrative support for the first transit service providing transportation options between Pendleton and Mission, Oregon. She shepherded the program through incredible growth to become a critical regional transit provider, offering fare-free rides to connect 18 communities in 4 counties of Oregon and Washington, spanning over 100 miles east to west and 70 miles north to south, and with new expansions on the horizon.

Before joining Kayak as the Fleet and Safety Manager in 2013, Rob Johnson had 38 years of experience as a diesel mechanic, including six years as an instructor at Blue Mountain Community College. He helped establish Kayak's Transit Center, which was completed in 2013, and developed its Fleet Maintenance System, which is nationally recognized as a gold standard in rural transit fleet management. A year into his retirement, Rob returned to Kayak part-time to provide inspections and safety training to the staff. Rob is known for pointing out, "The shop floor does not have oil stains because engines are not supposed to leak."

This transit power couple built an institution that will provide transportation options to the region for generations into the future.

Martin Richey logs 1,800 service hours and 80,000 service miles annually on the Arrow route, taking passengers between Pendleton, Mission, Meacham, and LaGrande, Oregon, over the infamous Dead Man's Pass on I-84, twice a day, five days a week in snow, fog, rain, shine, or the occasional elk herd. He is a safe, reliable, professional driver with an impeccable safety record who traverses one of the nation's most hazardous stretches of the Interstate Highway. He prides himself on keeping his passengers safe and getting them where they need to go – even if he must stay overnight in LaGrande during a freeway closure now and then to do so.

Kayak Public Transit is owned and operated by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. It is funded by federal, state, local, and tribal grants and contracts to provide public transit services to the region. For additional information, please call the Kayak Dispatch line at 541-429-7519 between 4:00 a.m. – 8:30 p.m., Monday through Friday.

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation is comprised of the Cayuse, Umatilla, and Walla Walla Tribes, formed under the Treaty of 1855 at the Walla Walla Valley, 12 Stat. 945. In 1949, the Tribes adopted a constitutional form of government to protect, preserve and enhance the reserved treaty rights guaranteed under federal statute.

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