Date of Hearing: April 19, 2021

ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION
Laura Friedman, Chair
ACR 51 (Gabriel) – As Introduced March 18, 2021

SUBJECT: Dr. Sally Ride Memorial Highway

SUMMARY: Designates the portion of State Highway 101 between the junction with Interstate 405, at postmarker 17.165 and Balboa Boulevard, at postmarker 19.217, as the Dr. Sally Ride Memorial Highway.

EXISTING LAW: Assigns the Department of Transportation (Caltrans) the responsibility of operating and maintaining state highways. This includes the installation and maintenance of highway signs.

FISCAL EFFECT: Unknown, but the measure requests that Caltrans only erect the appropriate signage upon receiving donations from non-state sources covering the cost.

COMMENTS: Sally Kristen Ride was born on May 26, 1951, in Encino, California. Her father was a political science professor at Santa Monica College, and her mother worked as a volunteer counselor at women's correctional facility. Both parents were elders in the Presbyterian Church.

From an early age, Dr. Ride gravitated toward math and science. She was strong-willed and athletic, and became so obsessed with playing football in the street that her parents pushed her into tennis lessons because it was a safer sport. She was soon playing in tournaments.

Dr. Ride attended Westlake School for Girls, a prep school in Los Angeles. Dr. Okie was her schoolmate, and wrote that she and Dr. Ride, both on scholarship, felt out of place among the actors' daughters and "Bel Air belles" at the school. Dr. Ride did not have to work hard for good grades, called herself an underachiever and refused to feign interest if she was bored in class. But it was at Westlake that Dr. Ride found a mentor and friend in Elizabeth Mommaerts, a science teacher whom she described as "logic personified." A great enthusiast for research, Dr. Mommaerts invited her favorite students, Dr. Ride among them, to her home to sample French food and wine and to hear stories about her life in Europe.

After graduating from high school in 1968, Dr. Ride attended Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, but quit after three semesters. She was homesick for California and was considering a career in tennis. She practiced for several hours a day, and also began taking physics courses at the University of California, Los Angeles. In 1970, she enrolled at Stanford as a junior. She played tennis for Stanford, became the team's No. 1 womens' singles player and was nationally ranked. She taught at summer tennis camps, and at one of them she met Billie Jean King, who urged her to quit college and become a professional tennis player. She did not take that advice.

Years later, when a child asked her what made her decide to be a scientist instead of a tennis player, she laughed and said, "A bad forehand."

She received bachelor's degrees in physics and English in 1973 (her specialty was Shakespeare), a master's degree in physics in 1975 and a Ph.D. in astrophysics in 1978, all from Stanford. Her graduate work involved X-ray astronomy and free-electron lasers.

Dr. Ride was finishing studies at Stanford University — she had degrees in physics and astrophysics (and also English) — and looking for a job when she saw the National Aeronautics and Space Administration's (NASA) advertisement. She looked at the qualifications and said, "I'm one of those people," she told The New York Times in 1982. She applied, and made the cut. "The women's movement had already paved the way, I think, for my coming," she said.

Dr. Ride was accepted into the space program in 1978, flew on the shuttle Challenger on June 18, 1983, and on a second mission in 1984. At 32, she was also the youngest American in space. She later became the only person to sit on both panels investigating the catastrophic shuttle accidents that killed all astronauts on board — the Challenger explosion in 1986 and the Columbia crash in 2003.

At a NASA news conference, Dr. Ride said: "It's too bad this is such a big deal. It's too bad our society isn't further along." The Soviets had already sent two women into space. When one came aboard a space station, a male cosmonaut welcomed her by saying the kitchen and an apron were all ready for her.

Speaking to reporters before the first shuttle flight, Dr. Ride — chosen in part because she was known for keeping her cool under stress — politely endured a barrage of questions focused on her sex: Would spaceflight affect her reproductive organs? Did she plan to have children? Would she wear a bra or makeup in space? Did she cry on the job? How would she deal with menstruation in space?

The CBS News reporter Diane Sawyer asked her to demonstrate a newly installed privacy curtain around the shuttle's toilet. On "The Tonight Show," Johnny Carson joked that the shuttle flight would be delayed because Dr. Ride had to find a purse to match her shoes.

In her early days at NASA, Dr. Ride trained in parachute jumping, water survival, weightlessness and the huge G-forces of a rocket launch. She learned to fly a jet plane. She also switched from physics to engineering and helped in the development of a robotic arm for the space shuttle. The Challenger commander, Robert L. Crippen, chose her for the 1983 mission in part because of her expertise with the device. She was part of a crew of five that spent about six days in space, during which she used the arm to deploy and retrieve a satellite.

At Cape Canaveral, many in the crowd of 250,000 that watched the launching wore T-shirts that said, "Ride, Sally Ride" — from the lyrics of the song "Mustang Sally. The next day, Gloria Steinem, editor of Ms. magazine at the time, said, "Millions of little girls are going to sit by their television sets and see they can be astronauts, heroes, explorers and scientists." When the shuttle landed, Dr. Ride told reporters, "I'm sure it was the most fun that I'll ever have in my life."

Her next mission, in 1984, lasted about eight days. She was on the roster for another shuttle flight before the Challenger blew up on Jan. 28, 1986, 73 seconds after taking off from Cape Canaveral. But the program was immediately suspended, and she retired the next year.

As a member of the panel appointed by President Ronald Reagan to investigate the accident, Dr. Ride gained a reputation for asking tough questions. The panel learned from testimony and other evidence that there had been signs of trouble on earlier Challenger flights, but that they had been dismissed as not critical. Dr. Ride told a colleague it was difficult not to be angered by the findings.

One witness was Roger Boisjoly, an engineer who had worked for the company that made the shuttle's rocket boosters and who had been shunned by colleagues for revealing that he had warned his bosses and NASA that the boosters' seals, called O-rings, could fail in cold weather. The Challenger had taken off on a cold morning.

In 1987, Dr. Ride led a study team that wrote a report advising NASA on the future direction of the space program. The team recommended an outpost on the Moon, though not a "race to Mars." But Mars should still be the "ultimate objective," the group said. In the report, Dr. Ride wrote that a lunar outpost would combine "adventure, science, technology and perhaps the seeds of enterprise." She also noted darkly that the United States had "lost leadership" to the Soviet Union in a number of aspects of space exploration.

The same year, Dr. Ride retired from NASA and became a science fellow at the Center for International Security and Arms Control at Stanford. In 1989, she became a professor of physics and director of the California Space Institute at the University of California, San Diego. She also developed a passion for trying to interest young people, especially girls, in science, math and technology. She wrote six science books for children, including one that explained how to make a sandwich in space. (She advised eating it fast, before it floated away.)

In 2001 she started a company, Sally Ride Science, to "make science and engineering cool again," as she put it, by providing science-oriented school programs, materials and teacher training.

In 2003, after sitting on a shuttle-disaster panel for the second time, Dr. Ride said in an interview with The Times that part of the problem at NASA was that people had forgotten some of the lessons learned from the Challenger accident. The panel had months earlier expressed its conviction that the disintegration of the shuttle Columbia over Texas was triggered when a chunk of foam insulation fell off the external fuel tank and gashed the leading edge of the wing. But she also said: "I flew the shuttle twice. It got me home twice. I like the shuttle."

Dr. Ride told interviewers that what drove her was not the desire to become famous or to make history as the first woman in space. All she wanted to do was fly, she said, to soar into space, float around weightless inside the shuttle, look out at the heavens and gaze back at Earth. In photographs of her afloat in the spaceship, she was grinning, as if she had at long last reached the place she was meant to be.

This resolution is the first to designate a highway in memorial of a woman of importance in the Assembly's 2021-2022 legislative session.

REGISTERED SUPPORT / OPPOSITION:

Support

None on file.

Opposition

None on file.

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