

Loss of fed money hurting counties

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Schafer said that the county has made every effort to make its various departments as self-sustaining as possible. Yet, despite those efforts, Curry County is still in a very compromising position.

“We have already spent the last six years moving everything we could outside of the general fund, putting it on its own, raising fees and doing everything we could,” Schafer said. “We don’t have anything left in the general fund that’s not mandated under the state Constitution. There’s nowhere to cut anymore.”

In nearby Coos County, the lack of federal funding will be felt in the county’s public health department, according to Commissioner John Griffith.

The county’s general fund contributions toward that department will dwindle from the current level of more than \$600,000 to around \$100,000.

“We’ll still be able to provide services, but probably not at the level we have been,” Griffith said.

He added that positions at the county are being eliminated, and others are simply not being filled.

Counties in Eastern Oregon aren’t fairing too well, either. Wheeler County Judge Jeanne Burch said staffing cuts would be difficult to implement, because the county only has 35 employees at the moment, many of whom hold multiple positions.

“The problem is, we don’t have the luxury of doing just one job,” Burch said. “Everybody does several.”

For example, Burch serves as the county’s chief executive officer and chairman of the county commissioners, plus presides over probate and juvenile courts and handles all the county’s payroll operations.

Wheeler County collects approximately \$750,000 in taxes per year, Burch said, and only one-sixth of its residents pay full taxes.

“There’s no question that we don’t have the wealth that a lot of counties do,” Burch said. “We don’t have enough property tax dollars coming in to make a difference.”

The county’s tax rate already is set at \$8.52 per \$1,000 of assessed property value, which places it at the maximum level allowed under the state’s Measure 5 and Measure 50-imposed tax limits.

‘Delinting’ the Caves

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featured in the August 2006 issue of “National Speleological Society News.”

NSS is an organization formed in 1941 to advance the exploration, conservation, study, and understanding of caves in the United States. The organization is subdivided into individual clubs called grottos, which are located in many communities around the nation. These clubs carry out cave-related conservation projects on behalf of NSS.

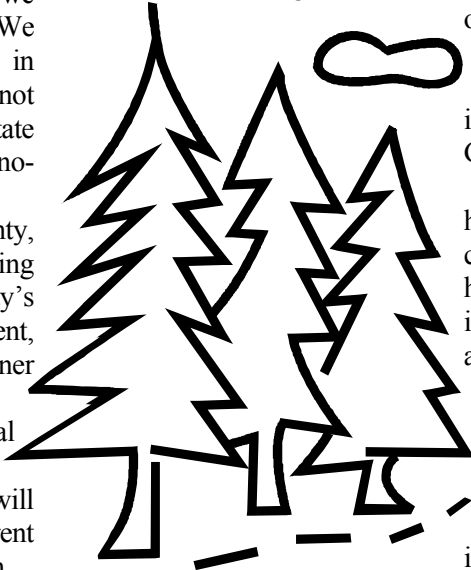
Projects include cave mapping, cleaning, scientific study, and gating caves to protect the natural environment or hibernating bats.

There are many projects that volunteers can work on at Oregon Caves. For more information contact Roth at 592-2100.

Burch said that Wheeler County officials met to discuss funding issues last week, but were hard-pressed to find any solutions.

“Frankly, we didn’t come up with any answers,” Burch said. “We’re not getting any good news.”

Harney County residents, also in Eastern Oregon, would see a drastic reduction in the road department budget if federal funds do not come through.



“We don’t get any general fund money; we run almost exclusively off the safety net,” said Kerry Landers, supervisor of the road department. He added that 81 percent of his department’s budget comes from that source.

The county has some reserve funds that will “sustain us at a moderate level for a few years,” he said. “But if they’re not refunded, we’re in trouble.”

Of all these counties, only Curry is planning a property tax levy to try and compensate for the loss of federal funds. The five-year \$4 million local option tax will be decided by voters in May, Schafer said.

If that tax passes, Curry’s tax rate will increase to \$2.45 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. And although the county held a series of town hall meetings to inform citizens of the proposal, with more meetings scheduled before May, Schafer acknowledges that the levy’s passage is far from guaranteed.

“It’s going to be a tough sell for us,” she said.

Griffith said that Coos County Sheriff Andy Jackson is considering an operat-

ing levy for his department, but that an amount hasn’t been set.

At this point, Griffith said he has “very little” hope that the federal government will step in to help Oregon’s counties.

“Congress worked on it all of last year and failed,” Griffith said.

A former logger, he said that the ultimate long-term solution is to turn control of the federal land over to local officials.

“The federal government should either manage its land or get rid of it,” Griffith said.

At the state level, it’s highly unlikely that the counties will be getting any help from Salem. The state is in no position to offer any assistance, said Anna Richter Taylor, communications Ddirector for Gov. Kulon-goski’s office.

“The state doesn’t have that kind of money to step in and backfill that,” Taylor said.

She added that Kulon-goski plans to travel to Washington, D.C. this week to try and lobby members of Congress to continue federal funding.

“The governor has been very concerned about this, and is working with Oregon’s congressional delegation and other states to lobby Congress to provide at least a one-year extension, if not longer, to the program,” Taylor said. “He’s been doing the phone calls and doing letters. The next step is to go face-to-face with them on their turf.”

However, Schafer is critical of how the governor’s office has handled the situation so far.

“All I get is lip service,” Schafer said. “They haven’t been down here to talk to us. They don’t know what the issues are, and they don’t understand. They don’t get it.”

In the meantime, county officials throughout the state will continue to be plagued with uncertainty.

“I don’t think anybody knows at this point what will happen,” Schafer said. “I don’t think anybody has the answers.”

Richardson backs funding for counties

State Rep. Dennis Richardson (R-Central Point) voted Thursday, Feb. 22 on House Joint Memorial 5, which encourages Congress to renew O&C funding vital to Oregon counties.

Currently, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000 will expire July 1 this year.

“Oregon lands were transferred to federal control with the promise of splitting timber profits with Oregon

counties,” said Richardson. “The federal government has failed to enable responsible timber harvesting, and Oregon will lose \$230 million per year in vitally needed revenue.

“If the federal government cannot keep to its part of the bargain, the timberlands should be returned to Oregon control,” he said.

HJM 5 was passed 58-0 by the House. Once approved by the Senate, the memorial will be sent to

Wyden promises strong battle for O&C

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any form that it was to be a transitional program,” Wyden said. “The intention was to address an offset.”

Grants Pass resident Chuck Davis said he was worried about Bush administration proposals to sell public land in order to fund the O&C program. Wyden expressed his opposition to such a plan, and said that most Republican senators didn’t even support it.

Regarding the Iraq War, Wyden said that he is one of 23 senators to vote against the Oct. 11, 2002 resolution authorizing the conflict.

Wyden also said he opposed President Bush’s proposed plan to send an additional 21,000 troops to bolster security forces in the region.

“We’ve had a number of surges already, and they haven’t worked,” Wyden said, adding that the Senate has yet to have an up or down vote on the plan.

He said there was an effort under way in the Senate to “redefine the mission” away from combat to support functions. He said that the shift would likely be done through the appropriations process.

Senate Democrats are also looking to replace the 2002 Iraq War Resolution with a new one that would limit Bush’s wartime authority, Wyden said.

Wyden touted his Healthy Americans Act, and said that the plan was developed over the course of three years, with input received from citizens at town hall meetings.

“The current health-care system cannot be sustained, folks,” Wyden said.

He said that the United States will spend around \$2.3 million on health care this year, which averages to \$7,000 per citizen. He said that for that amount, “We could have a personal doctor for every seven people in the country.”

Wyden explained that the current health-care system has been in place for 60 years, which is why reforming it has proven to be difficult. The system was set up during World War II when

prices and wages were frozen, and prior to the existence of a global economy.

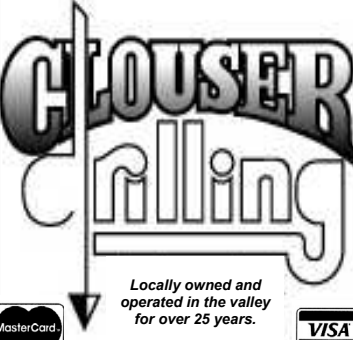
He said that his plan would “unravel the system,” cut out middlemen and administration, and is modeled on the healthcare plans offered to Congressmen.

“What I’m talking about is not socialized medicine,” Wyden said.

He also addressed concerns that the United States

may be planning an attack on Iran. Oregon Congressman Peter DeFazio (D-Springfield) has supported a resolution that would require Bush to seek Congressional approval before engaging in such a conflict.

Wyden said he agreed with DeFazio, and that many supporters of the Iraq War would be unwilling to back a war against the Iranian regime.



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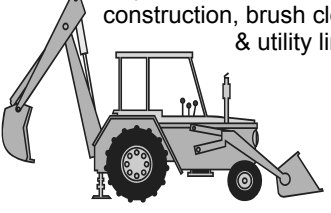


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