

We're In This Together

Reasons for supporting the county income tax

A lot has been said about the financial problem facing Lane County.

Those who know me know I like to get to the point quickly. So here it is in a nutshell: The federal government's commitment to county payments funding is inadequate, declining and unreliable, and time is running out. And one way or another it will soon go away.



In all my years as an elected official, I've never seen Lane County in a bigger fix than it is in today. Hands down, this is the toughest problem we've ever faced. I say "we" because we're all in this together. We have less than three months to adopt a balanced budget, and with every passing day we get closer to laying off 250 employees and being forced to take a wrecking ball to operations that serve vital public health and public safety needs.

Lane County would avert immediate drastic cuts to health and safety services if the federal government approves legislation pushed by the Oregon Congressional Delegation - notably an amendment proposed by Sen. Ron Wyden and co-sponsored by Sen. Gordon Smith that would provide full federal county payments (known as Rural Schools payments) funding for one year, with steadily declining funding through 2012. This year's money is subject to a presidential veto. President Bush has vowed to veto the appropriations bill due to language pertaining to withdrawal of U.S. troops in Iraq. He even referred to our "Rural Schools" money as "pork."

We can't and shouldn't depend on Washington to meet our most basic needs. The money the federal government owes us, in lieu of the tax revenue for federally held timberlands, is subject to the political whims of Washington. It's about time we took control of our own financial future and all programs and services that keep our community whole. We need to solve this puzzle ourselves. Even if we get a one-year extension of the federal money - and at the moment that doesn't look very likely - we will still face a need to cut about \$3 million in services this year because of the county's structural deficit that has already forced us to make service cuts 12 out of the last 15 years.

My colleagues and I have put a proposal on the table for you to vote on. It is an income tax that will bring in enough money to pay for public health, safety, veteran and extension services and other essential general fund services. Without approval of the income tax, many of these services will simply no longer be possible when the federal money is gone. Last November's tax measure was an opportunity to add additional money to the public safety system in an attempt to fix it. Now that we've lost the long term federal money, this income tax will only save existing services. We are asking only to maintain what we currently have - not add anything new. Here are the services that will be cut or eliminated:

WIC (Health and nutrition for more than 8,000 women, infants and children). Early prevention programs. Pathways (juvenile boys drug and alcohol treatment). Community health centers. Civil process. Community Corrections Center: 83 beds. Contracted drug detoxification and outpatient services. Services for adults with developmental disabilities. Lane County Animal Regulation - enforcement and abuse investigation. Contracted services for homeless and at-risk youth violent crimes detectives. Parole and Probation - domestic violence. Jail, first half of third floor: 48 beds. Search & Rescue. Mandated treatment for adult sex offenders. Services for children with developmental disabilities. Services to persons with severe mental illness. Psychiatric care to severely emotionally disturbed children. Contracted services for family violence, abuse and neglect. Methadone services. Jail, intake holding second floor: 35 beds. Jail, close second floor dorms: 53 beds. Community Correction Center: additional 36 beds. Contracted meal delivery to elderly and disabled. Contracted prevention services for Latino families. Community Service Program (alternative to incarceration). Board of Property Tax Appeals. Forest Work Camp and community crews: 65 beds. Electronic Surveillance Program (alternative to incarceration). Forest Work Camp housing: 35 beds. Jail, intake holding: 35 beds. Federal Forest Inmate Work Crew. LCARA kennel/cattery. Forestland Law Emergency Services. Human Rights Committee support. Advocacy and support for veterans and their families. Lane County Extension Services. Metro Television. Psychiatric Hospitalization Crisis Team, staff reduction. Juvenile Forest Work Crews. Juvenile intake, supervision and YS management reduction. Dunes Patrol/Search & Rescue. Information Services. Lane County Parks.

As you can see, the list is breathtaking. Lane County cut the "fat" years ago. We're into the bone and muscle now. A "yes" vote on 20-129 is not only a vote to maintain these services, it is a vote for our community. It is vote for us and our friends and neighbors that rely on these services and for those who have no where else to turn. Please don't let them down.

Some have suggested we should intentionally crash our county government and wait for a better solution some day. This is irresponsible, and we simply have no more time to wait. Your "yes" vote can solve this puzzle. We ask you to remember that we're all in this together.

Lane County Commissioner Bill Dwyer represents Springfield and eastern Lane County.

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