

False Assurances

The dangers of committing money we don't have

Working on the Lane County Budget Committee taught me how easy it is to get lost in the politics and forget our core mission: to encourage government to address and resolve social problems for the common good. Public health and safety are two of the most important priorities of governments. Maintaining these priorities even in hard times is central to creating the community we would like to have.



Once we completed our process and made our recommendation, however, the public reaction from some was swift and bitter. Some people are scared for their jobs or their safety, and for a very vocal few, fear has turned to anger. I hope that as a community we can overcome our fear and anger and advocate for the kind of government we are working so hard to build in Lane County.

About those jail beds: The issue is not whether we want to open the module in the county jail but whether we can afford to. I voted not to open the jail at this time because those jail beds cost \$3.2 million to fund for a year. This is \$6.4 million over two years and up to \$16 million over five years. As a budget member, I learned that we must project forward several years to assure stable funding for programs and promote the efficiencies to be gained by experience.

The state is a major funder of Lane County services in almost every department. Health and Human Services, Department of Children and Families, the Sheriff's Office and the district attorney all also rely heavily on state funding. All provide critical services. An analysis of the implications of various funding decisions made it clear that the cost of 84 jail beds outweighed every other addition in the proposed budget. Given our current income expectations over the next five years, making a \$16 million commitment would be wrong. It would sacrifice so many other programs for such a short-term gain. I also did not want to hire jail staff, only to lay them off later.

What about the decision to fund half-time staff for the county commissioners? The goal there was to build capacity for constituent services. Most other counties provide support staff to assist their commissioners with constituent services. We want to get a speedy response from our commissioner when we have a problem with county processes or government. I have also heard many complaints from county residents about the time it takes for commissioners to return their calls or emails. After a grueling month of evening budget meetings, I am utterly convinced that these elected officials are working their tails off. The new assistants would not be serving the commissioners – they would be serving us.

We still do not know the full impact of the state budget cuts, but we do know that cuts to state human services programs will be severe, affecting poor working families, people in our community with developmental disabilities, foster children and families, and much more.

I support the commissioners who are withstanding the temptation to placate the community with false assurances of jail beds tomorrow. If we spend money that we do not have, we not only violate our own budget rules, we obligate ourselves to provide services that we may not be able to sustain in the coming years. Will we have the strength to resist cuts to vulnerable populations, like people on the verge of eviction, survivors of violence seeking safety and shelter, the elderly and disabled?

Progressives of Lane County, now is the time to act on your hope and vision. Support our progressive commissioners in their decision to wait on funding certain programs until we know more.

Rose Wilde is an appointed member of the Lane County Budget Committee. She speaks only for herself.



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THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

HEALTH FIRST

Alan Pittman's well researched and written cover story (5/28) on funding jails rather than schools is indicative of how our state hasn't a clue about how to spend our tax dollars.

If, as the Department of Corrections says, 44 percent of prison inmates suffer from a mental illness, why not spend fewer and more beneficial dollars to get these inmates into recovery prior to committing a crime, being arrested and sent to prison? This way costs less and leaves more funds for our children's education.

Prison operations cost more than pre-prison mental health services. Boosting funds for mental illness services and reducing prison funding makes it possible to reduce crime rates and the need to warehouse mentally ill criminals. If you factor in that most convicts released from prison have no after support services for their mental illness, it only means that they are destined to repeat their criminal experience and cost the state more dollars that can't be used for education.

Funding mental health gives back far more than it costs.

Terry Arnold

National Alliance on Mental Illness

Eugene

A LITTLE PATIENCE

How can County Commissioners Stewart and Dwyer vote for jail beds and their cost of \$3,237,695 when we won't know until July what the state budget will provide? It is irresponsible! Let's all take a deep breath, be patient and make these important decisions when we have the money in the County treasury.

Cuts in human services and education are already cheating our kids and our elderly, so let's not risk their small county funding with risky choices now.

I want to thank Commissioners Sorenson, Handy and Fleenor along with the Budget Committee for their careful deliberation of our budget and their wise

but long and difficult decision-making process.

Ruth Duemler

Eugene

LETHAL TASERS

The Eugene police recently released a report on their use of Tasers, which has some surprises I'd like to share:

First, the police conclude that the primary value of a Taser is not its ability to subdue an aggressive subject but rather that people are terrified of them and upon the threat of being Tased, the vast majority of subjects become highly compliant. Unfortunately, this effect is dependent upon a policy that gives officers broad discretion in the use of Tasers.

Second, based on the data provided, it's apparent that the Taser will fail more often than not to subdue a subject on the first shot. Therefore, the Taser is only reliably effective when the officer has the luxury of time to shoot a second, third or even a fourth time, something unlikely to exist when faced with an actually aggressive subject.

Third, the data indicates that the use of nonlethal force by the Eugene police has increased 450 percent since Tasers were introduced and predicts that once every officer has a Taser, Tasers will be used on average of once every two days, the vast majority not being lethal force situations.

If the Eugene police only wanted to use Tasers where lethal force would be justified, none could justifiably oppose them. As the recent death by Taser in Salem shows, however, Tasers are lethal. Tasers need to be legally defined as lethal weapons. Until that happens the number of "mysterious" deaths will only continue to rise.

Jeff Gent

Eugene

PROTEST WITH CARE

I have become troubled by an apparent absence of attention paid to personal