

# Chief Durr reflects on importance of school resource officers

Senate bill to ban SROs seems likely to die in committee

By Rudy Diaz  
Blue Mountain Eagle

A bill in the Oregon Senate would prohibit school resource officers. Although it appears unlikely to move forward, John Day Police Chief Mike Durr, who serves as a resource officer at Grant Union Junior-Senior High School, said the proposal gave him time to reflect on the importance of the program for himself and the students.

Senate Bill 238, which would ban school districts from approving contracts to have law enforcement in schools, currently sits in the Education Committee, but committee chair Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland,



From left, Kohlten Jones, Nikki Jones and Clara Carr stand in the hallway at lunchtime with John Day Police Chief Mike Durr, the school resource officer, in 2018.

Eagle file photo

said Feb. 25 that he would not allow such a bill to move forward.

Durr is glad the proposal seems doomed. He said the bill is a bad idea.

Although his job as a school resource officer is primarily ensur-

ing the safety of the students, his role goes far beyond that.

Durr said he is also a resource to the staff and the position gives him a chance to meet as many students as possible.

"It helps me get right with them, and they feel way more comfortable," Durr said. "It shows them that we're not the monster that we are sometimes portrayed to be recently in the media."

Durr said getting to know students and teaching them what his job entails helps build trust and shows students an officer does more than just law enforcement.

"We go far beyond just enforcing the rules," Durr said. "I don't think everybody understands fully what we do."

In the last couple of years, Durr said the police department has identified four elderly people who needed assistance and were unable to live on their own. He said he helped get the ball rolling with the proper authorities to provide the help they needed.

Mental health is another area

where law enforcement officials can assist people in their moment of need and direct them or transport them to the proper care.

"We're just the first responders for a multitude of things, and it's not just enforcing criminal law," Durr said. "It can be as simple as helping a lady getting her tire changed."

Along with making trips through the hallways, Durr said he also tries to attend many school sporting events to show his support to the school and students while making sure everything goes smoothly at campus activities.

"I tell my wife that I love going to that school and interacting with the kids because I hear or see something pretty amazing everyday," Durr said. "Those kids are fun to be around, and it's me being able to develop a relationship with them."

## Election reform, COVID-19 relief discussed during Sen. Merkley's virtual town hall

Oregon senators pushing for renewal of PILT and SRS funding

By Steven Mitchell  
Blue Mountain Eagle

During a Grant County virtual town hall, U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley answered questions Wednesday about a wide range of topics.

### Payment in Lieu of Taxes and Secure Rural Schools Act

Merkley said he and U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden have been doing everything they can to keep both Payment in Lieu of Taxes and the Secure Rural Schools Act alive.

PILT, which funds states to offset property taxes losses in areas with high concentrations of federal public lands, brought Grant County upwards of \$700,000, according to Merkley.

He said the rural schools act, a 2000 law that funnels federal funds to communities hit by declining timber revenue, put \$3 million in the county's coffers.

Merkley said he and Wyden have had to take "extraordinary means" to keep SRS alive because Oregon is one of the few states that benefit from the program.

He said Oregon gets the lion's share of the money. He said it has been hard to get permanent status for the program, which expired in September.

Merkley, along with Wyden and U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, introduced a bill that would reauthorize the SRS program through September 2022, according to a Feb. 25 press release.

### For the People Act, H.R. 1

Merkley touted a bill House Democrats passed Wednesday. The For the People Act, H.R. 1, would provide sweeping reforms to protect voter rights, increase election security and mandate independent redistricting.

Merkley said the legislation would require states to establish a bipartisan, independent commission to redraw their congressional districts and prevent gerrymandering, or the manipulation of district boundaries



U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley during a 2019 town hall in Mt. Vernon.

Eagle file photo

to create an unfair electoral advantage favoring one party.

An independent commission, Merkley said, would prevent one party from trying to "squelch" the voice of another.

Currently, he said, most states rely on their state legislatures to draw congressional lines following the Census, which leads to districts disproportionately drawn and protective of either party.

Merkley said the legislation would restrict states from purging their non-active voters from their voting rolls. He said, in certain instances, some states purged voters that did not vote in two out of four election cycles without notifying them.

According to the bill's text, other provisions include that state's restore a felon's voting rights, offer 15 days of early voting and allow for "no-excuse" absentee ballots.

Merkley said another section of the bill would force the disclosure of donors to "dark money" political groups, which, he said, are reputed to be associated with overseas corporations looking to influence the political process while remaining anonymous.

He said citizens should know where that money comes from and decide for themselves if it's a credible source.

He said the bill lays out that elected officials, particularly the president, would be mandated to reduce or eliminate conflicts of interest and would be required to sell off assets, or place them in a blind trust. He said the legislation also calls for a code of ethics for among judges.

### Debt-free college vs. free college

Adrian Kautzi, who is in her third year of classes online, asked Merkley about his thoughts on the notion of free college.

Merkley said he supports debt-free college.

Merkley said "debt-free" college would essentially work on a sliding-scale basis. He said, instead of an incoming student having \$20,000 in tuition fees waived, they would pay the portion of it, based on the student's income.

He said most developed countries have the goal of making college debt-free for students and their families. Merkley said he is from a blue collar area, and parents from the community have told him they are not sure if they want to encourage their kids to attend college because of the debt they might rack up.

"That's not just bad for the individual student," he said, "that's bad for our whole society."

Merkley said there was a time when that was not the case. He said when he graduated high school in 1974 it was possible to work a minimum wage job during the summer and pay for college on those earnings.

"Debt just wasn't an issue that we had anxiety over," he said. "So how is it now that college is more important for lines of employment opportunities that we've got this enormous burden?"

He said countries that have addressed eliminating long-term college debt are doing better by their youth and their respective futures.

Merkley said Kautzi "painted a really good portrait" of what people are facing.

He said he is fighting for a vision for a debt-free public university system in Oregon. Merkley said those who are headed to Ivy League schools are likely going to pay a lot more, and that may not be something the government can cover.

## Grant County invasive grass bill gets first hearing

SB 21 would develop a pilot program in Phillip W. Schneider Wildlife Area

By Rudy Diaz  
Blue Mountain Eagle

A bill specific to Grant County had its first hearing.

The first public hearing for Senate Bill 21 was March 1 as local representatives and Grant County residents spoke on the importance of addressing what they called a disaster in Murderers Creek caused by invasive grass.

SB 21 directs the state Fish and Wildlife Commission to develop and adopt an invasive grass pilot program in the Phillip W. Schneider Wildlife Area.

The program will be designed to increase habitat quality and forage for mule deer and livestock, site resistance to grass invasion and understanding the roles that soil microbes, organic matter and nutrients play in affecting resistance to annual grass invasion.

State Sen. Lynn Findley, R-Vale, presented the bill to the Senate Committee On Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery and said the bill is important to the residents of Grant County.

"Annual invasive grass species have altered the landscape in the South Fork of the John Day Watershed and reduced the ecosystem, including forage and habitat for wildlife and livestock," Findley said.

Findley said the passage of the bill will continue to prioritize a reduction in annual invasive grass species and hopefully bring more skills and knowledge on eradicating invasive grass across Oregon in the future.

Rep. Mark Owens, R-Crane, testified in support



Prairie City resident Frances Preston speaks to the Grant County Court Sept. 23.



State Sen. Lynn Findley, Rep. Mark Owens, Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer

of the bill and said the noxious weeds impact Oregon economically and through the fire regime. He said, when a fire goes through an area and restoration programs are not enacted, noxious weeds can develop.

Owens said he was able to view the impact of invasive grass that came from the Canyon Creek fire with Grant County resident Loren Stout. Owens saw miles of ventenata, an invasive grass, and said the area has the potential for another historical fire.

"This (invasive annual grass) came from the Canyon Creek fire, and we're here to repeat that process again," Owens said.

Grant County Commissioner Sam Palmer testified about firefighters and the detriment to their health when inhaling burning invasive grass.

"These three weeds

(Medusa Head, ventenata and cheatgrass) are silica-based weeds that, when they burn, they put small glass particles in the air that our firefighters and citizens breath" that affects the lungs on a microscopic level, Palmer said.

Grant County resident Frances Preston said the Murderers Creek Wildlife Area is no longer viable due to the impacts from the invasive grass. She said the silica base makes invasive grass inconsumable by wildlife.

"I pray that you move Senate Bill 21 forward and provide the future support needed for ODFW to do what is now critically necessary to meet the goal to improve habitat, site resistance and resilience," Preston said.

The committee will vote on the bill on a date not yet scheduled.

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**Display & Class Display Ads** must be in on **Friday before 4:30 p.m.**

**Legal Notices** must be in on **Friday before 5:00 p.m.**

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