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Letters

Thanks for help with Christmas Dinner

To the Editor:
We wish to express our thanks to all of the volunteers that helped make the Christmas Dinner in Vernonia a success this past year. We served over 150 people in the community but could not have done it without a lot of help.

Special thanks to Pauline Coffman, Bob and Audeen Wagner and son for serving, Richard and Wes Lubbes for helping in the kitchen, and Art and Georgia from McMinnville for serving dessert. We also want to thank Jim and Susan Gore for their contribution and the Vernonia Senior Center for donating the use of their kitchen and dining room on this special day. There are many others who helped to put this event together and we thank everyone who lent a hand.

We would like to remind everyone that the Vernonia Senior Center is open to the entire community, five days a week, for nutritious lunches.

**The James Gang
Vernonia**

Keep law library for use of all citizens

To the Editor:
The Oregon legislature is again in session with an agenda involving the transfer of public dollars into the pockets of big corporations and away from basic public services providing jobs and services to the citizens of Columbia County.

One example is the cuts to the court system in Columbia County. Budget cuts have resulted in layoffs and now the courts are only open 4 days a week and by phone 6-1/2 hours per day, 4 days a week. Processing of cases is delayed, cases take longer, and controversies and problems go unresolved longer. The people laid off are our neighbors.

These cuts are on top of major cuts to Legal Aid, which sharply reduces the access of lower income county residents to the courts, making them even more vulnerable in a world where the wealthy and big corporations have \$1000/hr attorneys and easy access to courts and legal resources. Lower income residents have to rely on substantially defund-

ed Legal Aid working with an excellent but limited set of local volunteer attorneys, and local educational resources to help them through the process.

One vital element in this is the availability of the Columbia County Law Library (in St. Helens a block away from the courthouse on 1st Street) as a resource for Legal Aid, local attorneys, and Columbia County citizens who educate themselves on the law and how to use the legal system. This Library has been a resource in our county for generations and is currently being reorganized to provide an up-to-date collection of legal publications in a variety of areas of the law for use by Columbia County citizens, Legal Aid and local attorneys.

That's the good news. The bad news is that the legislature, in addition to further budget cuts to the courts, is considering wiping out county law libraries. The most often heard argument is that "it's all online" so we don't need libraries. This is nonsense. While it is true that most of the legal materials in the library are on line somewhere, access is allowed on

line only through specific subscriptions and they are very expensive. Libraries were invented as a form of co-op so that we all pay a small amount (in filing fees for court cases) for a central collection that we can all use when we need it, as op-

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Policy on Letters

The INDEPENDENT will not publish letters with personal attacks on private citizens. Preference will be given to brief letters, 300 words or less.

All letters must be signed and include a verifiable address or phone number.

NOTICE

The INDEPENDENT is published on the first and third Wednesday of each month. Because February has five Wednesdays, there will be three weeks before the next issue, on March 7, 2012.

The deadline for the Mar. 7 issue is Friday, Mar. 2.

Salem Scene

By Representative Brad Witt
Oregon District 31



On Wednesday, we received the latest update on the state's revenue forecast. It was better than we had hoped, but still shows us losing an additional \$35 million for a total of about \$340 million for this biennium. According to state economist Mark McMullen, Oregon is experiencing broad-based growth across many private sector industries, although it is stubbornly slow and still very fragile. In addition, the loss of public sector jobs is still a drag on the recovery. Nevertheless, due to some very adroit maneuvering, there will be no further cuts to K-12 in the re-balance budget that we will vote on later this month. That is great news for our local school districts.

Furthermore, when we formulated the budget during the 2011 session for the 2011-2013 biennium, we knew that our ship of state had not quite turned around yet, so we held back 3.5% of all agency budgets, with the exception of K-12, as a contingency. Thankfully, the \$340 million shortfall is almost exactly the amount of the holdback. Having said that, Human Services and Public Safety were left, oftentimes, with programs operating at unacceptable levels.

We have heard from many constituents pleading with us to protect funding for essential programs for seniors, the disabled, and both in-home and long term nursing home care. I'm happy to tell you that we have been able to protect those programs. In addition, Employment Related Day Care (ERDC) and Temporary Aid to Needy Families (TANF) will continue at substantially their present levels of funding.

I'd also like to update you on the Senior Property Tax Deferral

program, which was affected by the housing crisis and therefore threatened with insolvency. In order to fill a \$19 million hole in this budget cycle, the 2011 Legislature passed HB 2453, which changed the parameters of the program in order to maintain its integrity. As a result, 1,664 participants were dropped from the program creating major angst within the low-to-moderate income senior community.

The House Committee on Revenue has been working with the Department of Revenue to find a solution to this unacceptable situation. Thankfully, they have, and key elements of the resolution are contained in HB 4039, outlined as follows:

- Delays by two years the reverse mortgage provisions of HB 2453
- Re-activates the 1,664 participants for the 2011-2012 property tax years
- Directs local tax collectors to issue refunds to those who have already paid their taxes
- Requires the Dept. of Revenue to collect information on program participants and report to the 2013 Legislature
- Requires financial institutions to notify individuals applying for a reverse mortgage that obtaining a reverse mortgage will make them ineligible for the property tax deferral program

On Thursday, February 9, HB 4039 passed the House on a unanimous vote.

Finally, the House passed two bills last week designed to support business and facilitate job growth. HB 4028 provides \$29.6 million in lottery bond authority to create jobs by investing in air, marine, and rail freight infrastructure, as well as sewer and water projects and community college capital projects. HB 4150 expands the Credit Enhancement Fund to help businesses access capital. These bills should get construction workers on job sites right away and connect capital to growing businesses.