

Pondering Three Competing Money Topics

By Alex Gardner, *Lane County District Attorney*

In Oregon's timber counties, there is discussion of a variety of funding efforts designed to help alleviate budget problems. Three competing money topics are easily blurred together or confused.

Will the federal government renew another anemic version of the Secure Rural Schools Act, and if so, what effect will it have on timber counties?

The timber counties can't afford not to accept any help the federal government is willing to provide, but federal support that amounts to a four or five million dollar net addition to the Lane County general fund probably does more long term harm than good, because the citizens hear about the money and assume the crisis has been averted. After decades of losing financial ground, Lane County's public safety system would require two to three times its current funding to staff at normal levels. In that context five million dollars, though helpful, would be a proverbial "drop in the bucket." We'd need approximately nine times that amount to achieve funding parity with Marion County, and closer to 18 times that to achieve parity with Multnomah County — or the net from robust and healthy logging activity. Government revenue from logging was just a part of the healthier economic picture. Logging also produced high-paying jobs that allowed residents to move up through the housing market and support other local businesses, and that in turn drove steadily improving property tax revenues that further buoyed public safety, schools and other essential government services.

Will Lane County get some increase in some version of Oregon Community Corrections Act (HB 3194) funding and, if so, what impact would it have?

Maybe, but the numbers are tiny in comparison to the hole we've developed over four decades. Lane receives just under \$9 million in annual Oregon CCA funding in exchange for managing state felons who used to be held in state prisons. Current legislation (HB 3194) contemplates shifting more work from state prisons to counties in exchange for grant support of up to \$1.7 million per year for Lane County. To put that number in perspective, it would cover less than four percent of the differential between Lane County revenue and the funding we'd have if we adopted the Marion County property tax rate — and we'd be getting a bunch of higher-risk, resource-consuming

felons in exchange for that money. (Marion County, a jurisdiction with similar populations of residents and felons, is struggling too. The Marion County D.A.'s office has high caseloads and is staffed far below national standards in a crowded, makeshift basement office full of shared "cubicles." The Marion County sheriff was just forced to close a busy section of the jail — so Marion is well below minimum prudent funding for existing demand. Still, if Lane County had the Marion County property tax rate, Lane County's gross revenue would increase by approximately \$45 million annually. If Lane adopted the Multnomah County property tax rate, our gross revenue would increase by approximately \$90 million annually (excluding costs associated with compression and collection.) Of course, Lane County is powerless to increase property tax rates beyond the restrictions imposed by Ballot Measures 5, 47 and 50, so a meaningful and lasting financial fix for Oregon's timber counties is in the hands of our state and federal politicians.

What is the net impact of the jail levy recently passed by Lane County voters?

In Lane County, the gross tax revenue, excluding costs and losses associated with compression and collection, is roughly \$27 million per year per \$1,000 of assessed property value. The net revenue on a 55-cent levy should be close to \$13 million. That's enough to guarantee a doubling of our current juvenile corrections and treatment capacity (producing a net capacity that's still a small fraction of what it was 10 years ago) and maintenance of a minimum of 255 jail beds. The 255-bed number will bring us up to one-third of the average Oregon jail capacity per 1,000 reported crimes. That's enough to ensure we can hold violent Measure 11 offenders, and that's a critical first step for which I am extremely grateful, but it still leaves us without the capacity to hold most burglars, car thieves and parole/probation violators. We'd also need to double our parole staffing to match state averages, and we need to replace dozens of positions in the D.A.'s office, which currently lacks the staff to review and file approximately 26 percent of our provable felony cases. Some day we also hope to add enough jail capacity to give meaning to local misdemeanor jail sentences, so offenders who are sentenced on crimes like assault, DUII and menacing will serve at least a third of the sentence ordered by the judge, but that's a challenge for another day. ■