



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Testimony in Support of House Bill 3126

March 20, 2013

Good Afternoon Chair Barker members of the committee,

For the record my name is Jennifer Williamson, I represent House District 36- Portland's Westside, which includes the Multnomah County Courthouse. I am testifying today in support of HB 3126.

The Multnomah County Courthouse may be located in my district but it serves the whole state. Before session began, I had the opportunity to spend the day with Presiding Judge Waller in the Courthouse. I toured the building, watched arraignments and drug court, and spoke with people working in the building and others who were there to just pay a fine.

It is clear that the Courthouse is a hazard to the hundreds of employees going to work every day including 230 state employees and 38 state judges. These are some of the safety concerns expressed by staff last year at a public forum:

*"The crumbling, crummy courthouse tells our citizens that what we do together, as a society, is less than unimportant. We should honor the core functions of our organized society, not disparage them. Plus, if the building falls down when it is occupied, the tragedy to the citizens, and cost to the State and County, will be beyond measure."*

*"I am fraught with anxiety every time I have to go to the courthouse because of its seismic instability, and court staff feel the same way. The unsafe conditions at the courthouse have been common knowledge for some time. The county and state should expect to assume full liability if they do not find a new and safer home for our courts and litigants before the next earthquake."*

*"The courthouse is a very dangerous place security-wise for staff to work; I hope you don't wait until some staff get killed or seriously hurt before taking action."*

*"I was working on the second floor when we had a large earthquake that caused us to evacuate. After that there were noticeable cracks in the structure. I and many of my coworkers believe that should we have another earthquake that we would not survive."*

*"I have avoided doing work in Multnomah County because of the courthouse. I have a background in risk management and am very aware of the unacceptable risk exposures in the current facility."*

The Multnomah County Courthouse is the busiest in the state. 437,675 cases were heard in the courthouse last year and 48 million dollars in revenue was collected. More than 17 million dollars went directly into the State General Fund from those revenues-- on average 35% of Court revenues go directly into the State General Fund.

According to a study from 2006 conducted by the Court Facilities Task Force:

The Multnomah County Courthouse is over 90 years old, designed to serve as the seat of government for a county of 250,000 citizens. Today the building houses much of the Multnomah County court system and other law-related offices, serving a population of 660,000. As many as 5,000 people pass through its lobby daily. The courthouse is crowded and dangerous due to various fire and safety issues and mechanical and electrical problems. There will be a catastrophic collapse with a moderate earthquake—an inevitable but unpredictable event.

We cannot afford to wait another legislative session to address this issue. We need to get this project under way and begin the process to build a new Courthouse.