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TO: Senate Committee on Judiciary

RE: SB 566, relating to medical examiners

Chair Prozanski and Members of the Committee:

The Lane County Board of Commissioners has examined SB 566 and thanks you for scheduling today's hearing on this measure. The concept of regionalizing Medical Examiner services in Oregon has been around for some time and makes good sense. The skills are specialized and necessary, and very often are critical to fair prosecutions. Counties typically house Medical Examiner-related services within their Offices of the District Attorney.

It is likely that each of you understand the fiscal reality of western Oregon's counties. Declining timber revenues, structural deficits resulting from Measures 5/50, and the increased demand for safety net services as the economy faltered meant that the County Administrator prepared a fiscal year 12-13 budget that demanded cuts of 25% from all Lane County Departments. Those dollars are not being added back in FY 13-14 as little has changed on the revenue side of Lane County's budget.

Cuts of that magnitude meant the District Attorney's Office had to make hard choices. With the presence of a state Deputy Medical Examiner in Lane County, the DA proposed to eliminate death scene investigators (to confuse matters, we also call them Deputy Medical Examiners). This issue became central to the Budget Committee deliberations, and we explored several options for attempting to bring back this service.

Ultimately, the Budget Committee appropriated one time funding to re-instate the services. We emptied a nuisance abatement fund, as well as delayed payment on money's owed to the State. After adopting the budget, one of the first things we did was arrange a meeting with the Governor's staff and Oregon State Police to discuss how to avoid a repeat of this scenario. It appears, however, that we will be destined for a repeat, as this concept did not become part of the Governor's budget package, and we recognize the costs associated with SB 566 are not covered, nor do we have a suggestion for a way to pay for the system envisioned within this bill.

However, we must stress that doing nothing is unacceptable. There are approximately 3,000 deaths in Lane County every year. About a third of those are un-attended, and almost half of those require Medical Examiner involvement to determine causes of death.

At the very least, we ask that you recognize this as a service that is threatened in much the same way that other shared services are threatened. It would seem appropriate to identify a way that counties could gain emergency flexibility for otherwise dedicated funds, or to develop a smooth transition such that the State could step in if a county were to declare itself in fiscal emergency.