

SOS Comments on HB 3453, Public Safety Fiscal Emergency in Josephine County

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Oregon State Representatives and Senators

CC: Governor John Kitzhaber

Re: HB 3453, Public Safety Fiscal Emergency in Josephine County

Dear State Representatives and State Senators,

By now, you are all aware of the fiscal crisis that exists in Josephine County, Curry County, and to a lesser extent other counties in Oregon. In short, this crisis has been brought about by the gradual dissolution of the O&C agreement and its successor, the Secure Rural Schools Act, followed by the repeated failure of local attempts to increase property taxes to compensate. We need not review the history here. It's the results that are important: the drastic reduction in funding for vital public services, particularly public safety and criminal justice, in these O&C counties. The impact has been a dramatic increase in crime, along with an equally dramatic reduction in the ability of the County public safety services to respond in a timely or effective way. Even in cities like Grants Pass, which have continued to fund their separate public safety services through city-level property tax levies, the results have been felt, since jail capacity and district attorney staffing have been cut significantly, leaving offenders back on the streets within days or hours.

This should be familiar news at this juncture. What may not be as apparent are the actions that local citizens have been taking for some time now to address this situation and come up with creative solutions.

Securing Our Safety (SOS) is a non-profit that formed in Josephine County in 2012. Our goal is to help our County identify solutions that will enable our community to provide and fund the services that are required for a "secure, stable, and sustainable Josephine County." We are composed of a diverse cross-section of community members, from public officials to business leaders, retired law enforcement officers to educators and parents, physicians and students and shopkeepers, concerned parents, and more. Our primary common element is a concern for the future of our community and a commitment to its well-being. To date our efforts have focused mostly on the local Criminal Justice System, since it is the key infrastructure component of our community that has been most radically affected by the current crisis. We have also been addressing, to a lesser extent, ways to support other basic requirements, such as schools, roads, utilities and other core community needs, on a sustainable and stable basis.

In collaboration with various partners and public and private entities, SOS has made remarkable progress on researching solutions and building public awareness here in Josephine County regarding our crisis. We have moved the ball. The result of the just-completed levy vote, which failed by a margin of 539 votes out of a total of 26,193 votes cast, represent a significant shift in public support for self-imposed property tax increases to fund public safety – a concept that until recently was all but unimaginable in this County. Our efforts, and those of our allies, are making an impact. We are concerned, however, that certain pending State actions could have unforeseeable and unintended consequences that may undermine our collective efforts to build local consensus for locally driven, sustainable, stable solutions over the long-term.

Let's be clear: we are anything but indifferent to the severity of the crisis we face. We hear the stories of victims of crimes in our County every week – some of us every day. Many of us have been directly affected ourselves. Our businesses have suffered, those of us trying to recruit professionals (such as physicians) to this area have found it more difficult, and the economic losses our County has suffered as a result of crime have been huge. And that is just over the past year. We are worried about the future, as our reserves are expended and funding for criminal justice and other basic services dwindles further. We are grateful for both the assistance the State has provided (in the form of increased State Police staffing, for example) and the concern for public safety in our County demonstrated by current deliberations in Salem.

Still, we believe that it is critical that any solutions to this crisis be locally driven, and that “outside” assistance (whether it be from Salem or from Washington, D.C.) be – in fact and in perception – primarily collaborative, cooperative, sustainable, and equitable. Anything else will, we think, be counterproductive in the long run, either encouraging a continued mindset of dependency on outside funding or stoking a nativist reaction against “interference” or “unfair taxation.” Our local political balance is delicate. Our efforts to build a coalition of support are making progress, but are still fragile. We are concerned that intervention on the part of the State, even if well intentioned, may backfire if it does not adequately address the desire of our citizens for a considerable degree of self-determination.

SOS and our partners – a coalition of hundreds of local community members and civic leaders – continue to explore a wide range of potential solutions in pursuit of our mission of building a “secure, stable, and sustainable Josephine County.” In spite of the defeat of two public safety levies in two years, we persevere and believe there are answers within reach. There are other proposals – such as a Justice of the Peace Court, local DMV fees to fund public safety, and reallocation of a portion of state lottery funds to fund county services – could have a significant impact, but require support in Salem and/or changes in current state law in order to work.

Josephine County needs help but not a handout, in our opinion. Nor is direct state intervention, absent direct partnership with local government and community organizations, likely to have a positive impact in the long run. What we hope for is a collaborative approach in which the State, the Federal government (particularly BLM and the Forest Service, as well as Congress), County officials, and local stakeholder organizations (such as ourselves) get together in a results-oriented, fast-track, open-ended work force to resolve the long-term issues facing Josephine and other Counties across rural Oregon and other parts of the West. This would allow us to share ideas, identify road blocks in local, State, and Federal regulations, and work quickly and

collaboratively toward long-term, sustainable solutions that will generate lasting community buy-in. Much of the work we need to do has already been facilitated by SOS and we welcome the possibility of sharing more of what we've done that we can state in this short letter.

As a starting point, SOS has developed a wide variety of avenues that we are actively exploring. We have 13 subcommittees, several dozen consistently active members, and over 500 local community members and civic leaders involved in various ways. We have collected nearly 1200 survey results from local citizens on the level of service and funding methods for our local criminal justice programs that they would support, and have also conducted focus groups, town hall meetings, and other outreach sessions across the County. We have worked together with other local non-profits and organizations to find a way to open a local sobering center similar to those successful in other Oregon communities. We have even gone as far as have a group of our members do a recycling event, bake sale, and car wash to raise awareness of our challenges and raise funds directly for the Sheriff's office. No doubt there are groups in Curry, Lane, and other Oregon Counties that have worked toward identifying potential solutions as well, which we would welcome sharing. Many of these concepts would greatly benefit from State-level technical assistance and/or legislative support, including (in some cases) help making necessary changes to State laws or regulations that pose unnecessary barriers to locally driven, sustainable solutions.

Our ideas include:

1) Increasing sustainable harvests of natural resources: Timber, minerals, and other natural resources were, in the past, the drivers of our local economy. Our County remains rich in natural resources which can be harvested in a responsible and sustainable manner. While no one reasonably expects the heyday of Big Timber or mining to return as they once were at their peak, there are undoubtedly ways to make sustainable, responsible use of our natural resources in support of local jobs and industry, innovation, and regional growth. We have made progress with the County's newly revived timber advisory committee and expect to devote some time to a mineral committee in the near future.

2) Sales Taxes and Other New Tax/Fee Revenues: A general sales tax or other new revenues (beyond property taxes) are worth exploring. For example, a portion of the State's DMV fee or the ability to attach a new fee to the DMV fee could be used locally for either public safety or transportation needs. This would provide financially challenged Counties such as Josephine County much more flexibility in dealing with public safety funding challenges. However, this would require a change in current state law.

3) Property Tax Adjustments: Various property tax alternatives are under consideration including levies or special law enforcement service districts. Given the near success of the last vote and the increasing support, another measure is likely to be crafted in the future.

4) Trust, Transparency, and Education: Increasing communication with the public and building trust in local government is a critical issue, here as in many other parts of the State.

5) Public/Private Partnerships: We have pursued many opportunities to invite new businesses and industries into our area, as well as exploring ways that public entities can partner with private enterprise to deliver needed services.

6) Improving Criminal Justice System Efficiency: Providing public safety services to an area as large as Josephine County in a cost-effective way is a major challenge. We continue to research ways to improve service levels while reducing costs.

7) State Lottery Funds: The State's Lottery revenues are largely unrestricted (although a certain smaller percentage has to be spent in certain ways). While it would take a constitutional change to ensure some of these funds go to local public safety services, 9 of the top 10 contributors to the Oregon Lottery sales in fiscal 2012 were O&C Counties. Working with the Legislature to change the way these proceeds are distributed, returning a portion of the net income to the local Counties based on the percentage of sales that come from each County, would go a long way toward solving our funding issues.

8) Justice of the Peace Court and court fee changes: One of the areas SOS is in the process of researching is the feasibility of a local justice of the peace court. The road block is the State's \$60 fee on all citations. In this scenario the State makes money but the localities many times lose money. Although a Justice of the Peace Court would improve system efficiency, under the current State fee structure the court itself would likely have to operate at a loss.

9) Biomass Industry Development: Exploring ways we can reap energy efficiently from our forests, while still preserving this treasure.

10) Opioid Treatment Program: Josephine County has experienced a spike in crimes committed by people with opioid addictions. To avoid "getting sick," these addicts will do whatever they must, which includes theft, burglary and robbery. It is critical to help these addicts gain control of their addictions. Josephine County currently has over 150 residents who commute to Medford in the next County daily to the Methadone Clinic. Josephine County is working with the State and other local treatment agencies to make our own clinic a possibility by year's end.

11) Volunteer Corps: Soliciting members of the community to participate in essential functions, where warranted and when appropriate; our Sheriff's Office has a corps of over 200 volunteers in various capacities.

12) College Works: Engaging the younger minds of our community to participate and to take ownership of the basic components necessary for a community, like the Criminal Justice System.

13) Property Resource: Working with our community leaders to identify dormant properties owned by local Government, to be utilized in such a way to promote business or wellness of our community.

Once again, we look forward to collaborating with the State on solving our local public safety funding challenges. We are in a crisis and need your help. We hope to do this in a collaborative,

consultative manner, building upon locally driven momentum, for the good of our community and the good of Oregon. Please contact us if we can help in your deliberations.