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FROM THE DESK OF Rep. Jim Weidner

HB 3422

Oregon attorney general pushes Legislature for more drug investigators

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Police enter a home in Klamath Falls to arrest a suspected drug trafficker. The state Criminal Justice Division led the investigation, which ended with arrests last month to break up a drug trafficking organization linked to a drug cartel. Legislators face a request to double the agency's resources for such investigations. *(Bruce Ely/The Oregonian)*

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Oregon Attorney General **Ellen Rosenblum** is pushing for last-minute funding to double her agency's ability to investigate drug trafficking as the Legislature moves toward adjournment.

Rosenblum's request is getting a second look in the wake of The Oregonian's **five-part series** this week on rampant drug trafficking in Oregon, fueled by Mexican cartels. The series detailed drug trafficking organizations in nearly every corner of the state.

The stories -- in addition to generating more than 1,500 comments online and notes of appreciation from readers and a variety of law enforcement officials -- is also being cited in hopes of giving fresh traction to a proposed state "Len Bias" law. House Bill 3422, which would create stiffer penalties for those who sell drugs that result in an overdose death, remains bottled up in the Legislature's budget-writing committee.

Rosenblum hopes legislators give the **Criminal Justice Division**, part of the state Justice Department, money for a second drug team as part of their "Christmas tree bill." The omnibus legislation sweeps up loose ends, including budget adjustments, at session's end.

"We're ready to roll but for the limitations," Rosenblum said Friday.

Under the curse of cartels

An Oregonian special report.

A team of investigators and prosecutors in the Criminal Justice Division conducts roughly two major drug investigations a year aimed at taking down trafficking organizations. The cases rely on surveillance, wiretaps and close coordination with local police.

The team's work was on display last month when 300 officers -- the largest operation in recent state history -- dismantled a meth trafficking ring in Klamath Falls. Authorities said the case was linked to a Mexican drug cartel.

Darin Tweedt, the Criminal Justice Division's chief counsel, estimated that a second team could help the agency put away another 30 to 60 significant traffickers a year.

Rosenblum's request -- rejected earlier this session by a Joint Ways and Means public safety subcommittee -- asked for \$2.5 million to add five agents, four attorneys, two analysts and a support person.

State Sen. Jackie Winters, R-Salem, co-chair of the subcommittee, said the committee instead opted to give \$1.9 million to Oregon State Police for 10 troopers and four detectives in southern Oregon, where voters' refusal to approve property tax increases has cut deeply into local law enforcement.

"We didn't have a lot of dollars," said Winters, though she acknowledged the growing threat from drug traffickers. "We now have this additional problem -- the cartels and how you actually ferret them out," she said. She said she hopes legislators start tackling the issue between sessions.

The other co-chair, **state Rep. Jennifer Williamson**, D-Portland, agreed. "We're dealing with a new kind of drug problem," she said. She hopes savings from sentencing reforms passed in the House this week can be directed to law enforcement budgets.

But **state Sen. Brian Boquist**, R-Dallas, doesn't want to wait.

"If we don't spend the money, it's going to get a whole lot worse," said Boquist, who is pressing colleagues in the Senate and House for the drug team money. He also wants money for an intelligence center at Rosenblum's agency.

As local law enforcement agencies see trims around Oregon, he said, the Criminal Justice Division will have to step in to lead sophisticated investigations.

"We have to pool our resources," Boquist said. "The only way to coordinate is at the state level." Traffickers, he said, are not only involved in drugs, they're behind cases of slavery, prostitution, money laundering and fencing.

State Rep. Bruce Hanna, R-Roseburg, a former House co-speaker who sits on the public safety subcommittee, hopes the money can be found. "The importance of drug interdiction in Oregon, especially in rural Oregon, is beyond measure," he said.

Budget concerns also are holding up HB 3422, which would create a state version of "Len Bias" laws. Under federal law, traffickers whose drugs are linked to an overdose death or serious injury face a minimum 20

years in prison. Oregon's federal prosecutors use the law to break up large drug trafficking organizations.

HB 3422 would create the crimes of drug-induced homicide and drug-induced assault, with minimum mandatory sentences. Chief sponsors are **state Reps. Jim Weidner**, R-Yamhill, and **Brent Barton**, D-Gladstone.

"With cartels as active in Oregon and expanding as they are, we need to put things like this in place," Weidner said Friday.

He said he doesn't expect the law to be used often but said in earlier legislative testimony that it would "create an atmosphere of compelled cooperation" to get drug dealers to help "prosecute these massive organizations."

The bill is supported by the Oregon District Attorneys Association and the Oregon State Sheriffs' Association.

-- Les Zaitz

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