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DATE: March 12, 2015
TO: Senate Committee on Finance and Revenue
FROM: Bill Hall, Lincoln County Commissioner
SUBJECT: SB 14

Chair Hass and Members of the Committee:

I'm Bill Hall, Commissioner with Lincoln County, and I want to urge your support of SB 14.

As a county commissioner, I represent our Local Public Health Authority and oversee all public health programs and services in my community. There are a number of public health duties for which we are responsible at the local level, and yet we receive relatively little state support to carry out these responsibilities. In fact, Oregon is ranked among the lowest five states in state funds dedicated to public health. Federal funds and county general fund make up the bulk of public health funding in our state.

In Lincoln County, we are committed to providing quality public health services. Like many local governments in our state, we regularly engage in a balancing act to ensure services are adequately funded. We work to find efficiencies and creative solutions where possible. For example, we have an arrangement with Benton County to share an epidemiologist, recognizing we don't need an entire FTE and can cut costs by sharing services. This is but one instance of the work that local governments do to protect services while remaining within our budgets.

Over the years, many counties have become quite good at doing more with less. However, eventually you have no choice but to do less. I think we have all sat up and taken notice as Douglas County announced that it would be relinquishing its public health role back to the state. That is neither an ideal solution for the state or local communities, but I do realize that many counties have had conversations about whether they can afford to continue funding public health at the necessary levels.

This bill would give counties one additional option for funding services when times are tough. The ability to tax tobacco at the local level would allow us to not only create a disincentive to smoking as part of our tobacco prevention work, but would also allow us to raise revenue for much-needed services. None of our constituents want us to decide between providing public safety officers and ensuring that restaurants are inspected, and the ability to raise this revenue at the local level would help guarantee that we are able to provide the services our citizens expect of their county government.

This bill does not create a mandate. It simply gives us the option to address the needs of our communities at a local level and seek local solutions to the challenges we face. I encourage you to pass SB 14 out of committee with a do-pass recommendation. Thank you.