



To: Members of the House Economic Development and Trade Committee

From: Sheriff Matt English, Hood River County
Oregon State Sheriffs' Association

Date: March 22, 2017

Re: Support for HB 2744 and HB 2768

Chair Lininger and members of the committee, for the record, my name is Matt English. I am the Hood River County Sheriff and I am here today on behalf of the Oregon State Sheriffs' Association to support the broad objectives of HB 2744 and HB 2768 and to speak specifically to the challenges we face in Hood River County.

Our county has been the fastest growing County in the State since 2010 but full time residents are less than 25,000. Like many small counties in Oregon, tourism has been a draw for some time but has exploded in recent years, much of it focused on eco-tourism related activities. The National Visitor Usage Monitoring (NVUM), the system utilized by the United States Forest Service to track forest usage, indicates there are over two million individual visits to the Columbia Gorge National Scenic Area and 4.9 million individual visits to the Mt. Hood National Forest annually. Parts of both National Forests lie within Hood River County.

The Port of Hood River counts vehicles that access their lots. They're seeing over 350,000 vehicles a year in the three lots they track by the waterfront. In July of 2015 alone, there were almost 68,000 cars that entered the river access parking lots within the City of Hood River (Pop. 7760).

With visitor numbers of that magnitude, it appears that tourism promotion is working. In many areas like Hood River County, the area sells itself and arguably doesn't need more promotion. The Sheriff's Office has been working on ways to increase staffing needed to keep up with the growing demand for services. One area of focus has been the exponential increase in recreation related services the Sheriff's Office has to provide.

Oregon law requires that all sheriffs respond to Search and Rescue calls in their counties. Additionally, Oregon Sheriff's run Marine programs, Forest Patrol and Off Highway Vehicle

Enforcement programs.

In Hood River County, the vast majority of people accessing these services are visitors. Currently, local taxpayers are paying for much of the increased recreational services but they're not benefiting from them, because they don't access them. The Sheriff's Office has to pull patrol deputies from their duties responding to criminal calls and patrolling neighborhoods to help respond to marine emergencies or staff search and rescue calls.

Between 2013 and 2015, the HRC SO took about 300 search and rescue calls for service. In that time, only two searches were for Hood River County residents. Hood River County ranks twenty-fourth out of thirty-six counties in terms of population yet ranked in the top fifth for search and rescue missions in 2014.

Sheriff's Office Marine contacts on the Columbia indicate that between 20%-25% of the contacts are local. The vast majority are from out of the area. In 2015, the lone full time Marine Deputy rescued people from California, Florida and Texas. Services were also provided to visitors from New Zealand, The Netherlands, Belgium, Spain and Canada. It's rare that marine patrol rescues a local.

The reality is that a lot of the recreational activity visitor's are engaging in comes with some level of risk. Death and serious injury are almost commonplace. In 2015, there were two recreational water deaths in Hood River, both were visitors and both were participating in non-motorized activities. In 2016, two visitors died in independent incidents on area trails. The unfortunate reality is that the Hood River County Sheriff usually responds to at least one recreational fatality every year whether it's on the mountain, one of the trail systems or a local waterway. While work is done to promote safety, education and prevention the sheer volume of visitors also requires appropriate staffing levels and resources.

In the last several years, the City of Hood River has annexed hotels that were within Hood River County proper. With the annexation came a loss of Transient Room Tax revenue to the County. The City has seen TRT revenues more than double in a four year period going from \$727,017 in fiscal year 12/13 to projected receipts of \$1,600,000 last fiscal year. They rely on the revenues from TRT for city operations and have expressed they would divert some of the funds currently going to the local Hood River Visitor's Council for recreational response, if they could.

The Sheriff's Office wants to support tourism and our local businesses but the volume has overtaxed available resources in small locales like Hood River County. Additional promotion of tourism will only exacerbate the issue. Without a focus on public safety infrastructure in small counties, visitor safety will be compromised.

I support the spirit of both bills with an amendment that allows locales the flexibility to divert a portion of the funding earmarked for promotion, to support recreational response programs like search and rescue, marine patrol, forest patrol and off highway vehicle enforcement. By keeping the intended purpose narrow, it will help ensure that the funds are applied to public safety services that are directly accessed by tourists and minimize the risk of funding going into a local government's general fund.

There is certainly not an expectation that one entity or one source of revenue should completely fund the amount of recreational response services needed. However, we are looking for a commitment from the stakeholders that are promoting and benefiting from the tourism that is the driving force behind this issue. The bottom line is we have to provide these services and we're committed to finding a way to fund them, so our local taxpayers aren't shouldering the burden.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. English', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Matt English
Sheriff
Hood River County