

February 18, 2025

The Honorable Floyd Prozanski, Chair  
Oregon Senate Judiciary Committee  
900 Court St. NE S-413  
Salem, OR 97301

Re: SB 95

Dear Chair Prozanski, Vice Chair Thatcher, and Members of the Committee,

As the former Chief Justice of the Oregon Supreme Court, I write in support of the current Chief Justice's request for two new judicial officers for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Judicial District (Lane County Circuit Court).

During my tenure as Chief Justice, I was responsible for the Judicial Branch of our state government. I learned that, for Oregonians to have trust and confidence in our government, they must see it as fair and effective. And I learned that accessible, responsive courts are essential to that mission.

Despite their heavy workloads, our Lane County judges and staff have done, and are doing, all they can to meet that responsibility. During the pandemic, they kept our courts open, and, every day, they provide extensive, necessary services, including, among other things, problem-solving courts for veterans, juveniles, and the mentally ill, judicially led status conference dockets for our huge, self-represented population, and, working with others, finding attorneys for indigent defendants to stave off the worst of the unrepresented defendant crisis in criminal cases. They are amazing!

The current Chief Justice is asking that you give Lane County two new judicial officers to enable them to continue this otherwise unsustainable work. I am begging you to do so.

I cannot overemphasize how hard it is to listen and respond, and to serve and innovate, when there is just not time in the day. When courts must postpone proceedings or hurry people through, delays occur, and people do not feel heard or respected. And courts cannot simply decide to do less. Operational courts are necessary to the peaceful resolution of disputes and to hold lawbreakers accountable. The Lane County judges know this and strive, daily, to meet the need. But their ability to provide critical services is at breaking point.

As Chief Justice, I sought approval of the OJD budget, and I appeared before the Judiciary and the Ways and Means Committees. I was cognizant that the needs of the judicial branch were not the only needs that the legislature faced and that the resources available to fund them were limited. I therefore advanced only the most pressing of our requests, also cognizant of the depth and breadth of the harm that can occur when our state does not adequately fund basic operations. Long-term inadequate funding can result in broken systems and the costs of systemic breakdown are high: It costs more to repair broken systems, and, when people lose trust in government,

they are less likely to comply with its norms and dictates, increasing the risk of damage to future generations and the cost of regulation and law enforcement.

We know that you understand and must prioritize the many needs facing our state. To help, the Judicial Branch has prioritized its requests for additional judicial officers. *The Lane County bench has been waiting for 40 years, and its request is now at the top of the list.*

Please recognize and support its steadfast work—work that is essential to the preservation of our democracy. If you support only what has failed and is in crisis and not what, despite all odds, has maintained and held, you send the wrong message. Please heed this desperate plea and do not risk the creation of a new crisis that our state cannot afford.

Thank you for listening. Please feel free to reach out if you have any questions or if there is anything else I can do to support this request.

Martha L Walters