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COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

May 19, 2009

Lane County Board of County Commissioners
Public Service Building/Courthouse
125 East 8th Avenue
Eugene Oregon 97401

Dear Commissioners,

I am writing in response to concerns I have heard from Lane County residents and the law enforcement community about the possibility of your not using federal funding from the recently reauthorized Secure Rural Schools Act to restore public safety services in Lane County. I almost never allow myself to become involved in county-level budget decisions, but I am making an exception in this instance because your decision may affect not only the safety of our shared constituents, but also future efforts to maintain some level of federal support for Secure Rural Schools (SRS) funding.

After authoring the original Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act of 2000, I spent several years, from 2006 – 2008, educating and persuading my colleagues about the historical importance of the federal government's commitment to rural counties. By March of 2007, important cosponsors such as Senators Harry Reid, Max Baucus and Jeff Bingaman, had joined my efforts. I was ultimately able to convince members of the Senate, in part, using repeated assertions from Lane County and other O&C counties warning of dramatic public safety cuts that would force inmates to be released, Sheriff's patrols to be reduced, and smaller communities to receive less protection.

You may recall that I promised Oregonians, despite a very challenging budget environment and hostile administration, that I was not going to give up the fight for a long-term reauthorization of county payments because they are so critical to some of the most fundamental responsibilities of county government – protecting and educating their citizens. And as you know, after building a new coalition with other western senators, I was successful in passing a 4-year reauthorization in the Senate and inserting that bill in successful legislation at the end of 2008.

In four years or sooner, however, it will once again be my task, as well as Senator Merkley's and Congressman DeFazio's, to attempt to convince our colleagues that rural counties deserve continued Federal payments. But if our adversaries can demonstrate that our claims in 2008 were exaggerated and convicted, violent criminals were released early for lack of funds -- while SRS funds were available -- it could greatly undermine our prospects for continuing federal support for rural counties.

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I understand from your press release of March 4, 2009, that the Board of Commissioners approved an order to allocate General Fund reserve dollars to public health and safety and avoid further layoffs. I certainly understand that years of successive cuts have been extremely difficult on law enforcement agencies and county governments, and many of you have had to tighten belts along with all Oregonians. As you address these challenging budget decisions, I ask that you keep in mind that the potential public safety disasters you foresaw made it possible to convince other Members of Congress about what would happen in our state without the reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools Act.

In closing, please know that I have enormous respect for the work that you do, and for your willingness to govern in good times and in bad. These are certainly extremely difficult times for the counties, and I understand all too well the difficulties you face in meeting your community's needs during this economic downturn. I look forward to working with all of you to tackle our shared challenges in the days ahead.

Sincerely,



RON WYDEN
United States Senator

cc: Alex Gardner, District Attorney
Sheriff Russ Burger