

"On the Road" Again

E-Newsletter April 20th, 2011

Dear Friends and Neighbors:

Yesterday evening was the first of the Ways and Means “On the Road” public hearings. This was the only public hearing scheduled in Portland, so there were many people there. It was at PCC’s Sylvania Campus, so of course I had to be there. While I am not on the full Ways and Means committee, I was able to sit at the dais with my colleagues as we listened to the testimony. Several other Portland-area legislators who aren’t on the committee joined us as well.

These public hearings are tough—there are so many people who want to share their stories, their issues, their passions. Because of time constraints, no one gets to speak for more than a couple of minutes, and (most frustrating for the legislators) there’s no time for follow-up questions. Most people there will never get a chance to be heard, though everyone can submit written testimony.

Given our current budget constraints, the testimony becomes even more difficult and painful. But for legislators, it is crucial that we hear the realities of these cuts directly from the people who are going to be affected by them. It’s a chance to hear from people who cannot come down to Salem to testify and don’t have paid lobbyists representing them. It’s important.

Yesterday there was time for testimony from just under 70 people. A few of them had suggestions for ways to increase revenue or save money. We heard from an employee of the Department of Revenue that the recent increase in compliance specialists was causing us to exceed our collections targets by more than \$75 million; he argued that we could do even better. We also heard from front-line public employees that manager-to-staff ratios are too high, and we could cut some middle-management positions without harming quality of service.

The 2 ½ hours of public testimony were frequently painful but also very moving.

Most of those testifying were there to tell us about the harmful effects of the potential cuts outlined in the Governor’s proposed budget. Here are some of the highlights:

- ⌘ **Work programs for people with developmental disabilities.** Many people came to speak to us about cuts to this part of the human services budget. The cuts would wipe out programs that allow people with developmental disabilities to leave their homes or residential centers to take part in supported work programs during the day. We heard poignant testimony about the way that these programs add dignity, value, and community to the lives of many Oregonians.

- ⌘ **Other DD Services.** People spoke about cuts in brokerage services for people with developmental disabilities. These are the services that provide in-home supports that allow individuals with disabilities to live with their families and free up family members to work outside the home.

⌘ **Prison programs that reduce recidivism.** Four or five people talked about cuts to some of the most effective and cutting-edge prison programs that have helped make Oregon one of the leading states in keeping ex-offenders out of prison (according to a report just released by the Pew Center): in-prison drug & alcohol counseling, classes in parenting and healthy relationships, and other programs that help break the cycle of criminal behavior. In addition to the value of these programs to the community, they save money in the long-term through reduced corrections costs.

⌘ **Other public-safety programs.** We heard about the need to restore funding to two important crime-victim programs: the Oregon Domestic/Sexual Violence Fund and the Attorney-General's Restitution Pilot Fund, both of which have been very successful.

⌘ **Funding for Courts.** Several people spoke about the impact of further cuts to our courts system. The resulting delays in court dates compromise people's ability to find protection and justice, and fee increases are making it difficult for small businesses to access the courts when they have been harmed. The cuts are also putting at risk the fledgling E-Court program in Multnomah County, a program that is already expanding access and saving us a lot of money in the long run.

⌘ **Statewide University Extension Programs.** A number of people talked about cuts to valuable Agricultural Extension and Food Innovation programs and to the Labor Education Research Center. These statewide programs provide really important services to working Oregonians all over the state.

⌘ **Supportive and Affordable Public Housing.** With the economic downturn, more people than ever are in need of affordable public housing. For those who are battling to stay clean and sober and regain control of their lives, there is a particular need for Oxford Houses and other facilities that combine affordable housing with peer-support and access to social services. They have clear records of success, but their funding too is at risk.

⌘ **Education Budgets.** We heard a number of stories about the awful effects of the current K-12 funding level from school board members, parents, and the PTA. They requested that we go into the education reserves for another \$100 million as soon as possible. We heard from community college advocates about the need to get their funding level up at least to \$425 million (still far below what it was two years ago) in order to meet the explosion of Oregonians seeking education and training.

⌘ **TANF and Jobs/Jobs Plus.** We are looking at big cuts to welfare programs, particularly to programs that involve training for work and job placement ("Welfare to Work"). Several hundred low-income individuals are currently being placed into work settings each month, allowing these people to break the cycle of poverty and dependency. We heard from five or six people working in these programs or who have benefited from them.

⌘ **Others.** We heard eloquent testimony from advocates for Ride Connection

(supported transportation for the elderly and disabled), OHSU's rural health provider programs, legal aid, the Children and Families Commission, and the Long-Term Care Ombudsman program. We also heard from two people who feel that the government is spending too much on programs currently.

As you can see, the legislators who are working on the budget face almost impossible decisions on where to make cuts. How do we choose from among so many important programs with so many passionate advocates, amidst the reality that most of these services will have to absorb cuts, and some will be eliminated?

Please let me know if you have any suggestions or questions about these or any other of the areas currently slated for cuts.

The legislature has set up an email address specifically for citizens to submit written testimony on the budget. To make sure that committee members see your thoughts on important programs that need to be protected, write up your thoughts and send them here with your name and address: waysandmeans.budget@state.or.us

Conservatorship Bill Sails Through House

I'm pleased to say that HB 2237, which reauthorizes the Public Guardian and Conservator Task Force, passed the House this week 58-0 (two legislators were absent). The bill now goes to the Senate, where it will be assigned to a committee.

Constituent Coffee: Time Change

We're going to try something a bit different for the next constituent coffee. Usually we meet on a Saturday morning, but this time we're shifting the time in hopes that it will allow some folks to attend who normally can't make it.

Join me Saturday, May 7th at 2 PM at Case Study Coffee (5347 NE Sandy Blvd). I'm looking forward to a little afternoon caffeine and conversation. Mark your calendar!

Until next week,

Michael