

## **Setting a Resilient Course**

By Pete Sorenson

Chair, Lane County Board of Commissioners

Good morning.

Thank you all for joining us this morning as we reflect on the year that has passed and look forward to the year ahead.

People always have a lot to say about Lane County Government, the government that serves the 347,000 people living in our 12 cities and our huge unincorporated areas. And it's a good thing, as one of the priorities of the Board of Commissioners this past year has been to increase our interaction with people who care about Lane County and its people.

Today I'll be talking about our core: It makes us step up each day to bring you our best level of service, even as we wrestle with the limited resources that our federal, state, and local taxpayers have given us.

That core is our resiliency.

How many times has Lane County Government had to make reductions to our staffing and our programs due to budget cuts?

We have some real challenges on the horizon, but today I'm going to keep those challenges on hold for a few more minutes so that I have an opportunity to share with you the accomplishments Lane County has made over the past year.

## **Community Government**

As a Board and as a government, we've stepped up "community government" – making your County government more accessible, the way it should be. Largely using existing resources to do more, we've held more outreach meetings this year than at any other time in Lane County history.

This past year, with the support of the Board, we've held meetings with groups that the Board had never met with before. A few memorable ones:

- Board and staff of Centro Latino Americano
- The Central Lane Labor Council
- The Cottage Grove Youth Advisory Board
- Board and staff of United Way of Lane County

- And a public safety community forum in Florence

In addition to these outreach meetings, Commissioners Fleenor, Handy and I have continued to host Town Halls and open office hour events. And Commissioner Handy and I have held several educational programs with Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy, in a joint effort to better serve the Eugene community.

Continuing with efforts to make Lane County an accessible government, we continued Lane County's Working for You Video series. These videos explain how your tax dollars are used in specific program areas. Please take a look at these videos: you will learn a lot quickly and can share them with your friends.

There are currently 12 videos on our website [www.lanecounty.org](http://www.lanecounty.org)

Other accomplishments include the roll out of our new "user friendly" website, the debut of the Your Lane Community Newsletter and the "one pager". The "one pager" allows any Lane County resident to submit their idea or question to our Board and get on the agenda of a Board meeting.

And, of course, we have implemented our Savings Are Valuable to Individual Taxpayer program. The SAVE-IT program allows taxpayers to submit ideas for saving money and have those ideas evaluated and possibly receive awards for their work. It's based on our long-time program, Savings Are Valuable to Employees or SAVE, which is a similar program.

This past year, we've completed our first ever County College.

County College is an interactive program that focuses on educating residents about the services the County provides every day. Elected officials and County staff hosted unique and informative sessions designed to give residents a hands-on experience in County government operations. Take the class! Be informed and involved! Join other residents who help keep our community strong by participating in County affairs.

Another significant accomplishment of the past year included the Board's countless hours devoted to interviewing and selecting new State Legislators. Under Oregon law, when there's a vacancy in the Legislature, the County Board of Commissioners appoints the new legislator. This past year, the Board selected Chris Edwards as the new State Senator for District 7 (West Eugene, North Eugene, Santa Clara and Junction City) and Val Hoyle as the new State Representative in District 14 (West Eugene, Junction City, Cheshire and Alvadore). We wish our new legislators well in their new positions.

Speaking of legislators and accomplishments: In 2009, the Board honored the determination and countless hundreds of hours of work that Representative Paul

Holvey of Eugene put into the field burning ban. The Board had voted unanimously to urge the Legislature to ban field burning in 2007 and we weren't able to get the bill passed then. However, Representative Holvey persisted in his efforts and by a one-vote margin; the legislation was passed in 2009. Thanks so much for this great accomplishment Paul! The people of Lane County and of the whole Willamette Valley will breathe a lot better.

It feels good to share these accomplishments despite our challenges – that's resiliency. That is what Lane County Government is about. We move forward because the need for the services we provide is not decreasing. In fact, the demand is increasing. Failure is not an option that we're even considering.

### **Fiscal Responsibility**

I want to say a few things about our ability to manage the taxpayer dollars we receive from the federal, state and local taxpayers.

Lane County's funding is made up of many different types of sources. Our local taxes and assessments are about \$40 million and that didn't change too much over our previous budget. Federal taxpayer funded sources fell dramatically, from \$71 million to \$64 million. State sources fell from \$92 million to \$85 million. Just looking at these sources, from our 08-09 budget to our present 09-10 budget, revenues fell \$14 million. And still Lane County balances the budget with what we have.

Did you know that our local taxes are among the lowest in the State? If you have a house in Lane County and it's valued at \$200,000 you pay \$1.28 per thousand or \$256 to support your County government. And I know that's in addition to your other property taxes for other services like schools and city governments.

By way of comparison, in Beaverton, you would pay \$450.

In Oregon City, you'd pay \$480.

And again, comparing the \$256 that the homeowner in Lane County would pay, the homeowner in Salem would pay \$604 to their county government.

We think you get a pretty good deal for that \$1.28 you pay. We are grateful to our property tax payers.

Concerning those federal revenues, and especially the federal forest funds, Commissioner Fleenor will talk more about the challenges of the federal forest replacement funds, but suffice it to say that the most current federal legislation greatly reduces the amount of federal forest funds. It is set to sunset in 2012.

Our 10-member Budget Committee – consisting of the five elected Commissioners and five community members who serve as volunteers – has worked very hard to balance our budget. Our staff in Budget and Finance again received awards for Financial and Budgeting Excellence. This marks more than five years in a row that Lane County has received awards from the Governmental Financial Officers Association. This past year we took transparency to another level by putting the Spending Transparency Reports on line.

We tackled the very difficult process of adopting a balanced budget. We did this by not having any significant increase in local taxes, while opening 84 jail beds – by a unanimous vote of our Board of Commissioners. This decision resulted in a reduction in the number of violent offenders being released prematurely into the community. I'd like to also mention the Sheriff's Office for investigating, apprehending and helping to convict Malcolm Gerlach, who kidnapped and sexually assaulted a 10-year-old girl in Lane County. Thanks for that special effort!

### **Getting Down to Business**

In 2009, we responded to the H1N1 pandemic threat, and our Sheriff's Office responded to more than 64,000 calls for service in the unincorporated portion of Lane County, where nearly 30 percent of Lane County community members live. We successfully transitioned the Lane Events Center as a County department, had a profitable Lane County Fair despite the recession, providing more free entertainment than ever at the Lane County Fair.

We increased the Firewise Program to provide protection for rural homes from forest fires and refinanced bonds at lower rates to save Lane County residents money. Our Lane County Animal Services staff and volunteers were able to turn about this agency, implementing new programs including the stray cat program and feral fix program. Their efforts are helping to reduce pet overpopulation and find more forever homes for our furriest community members.

In Elections, we maintained the records of 207,544 registered voters and we're gearing up to count between 350,000 and 400,000 ballots this election year.

Our Board adopted countywide coordinated population forecasts that will serve as the basis for growth planning efforts for years to come. The Board continued its land use planning efforts and – as an example that our community can find solutions – under the leadership of Commissioners Fleenor and Handy – settled a contested Urban Growth Boundary expansion matter in Junction City involving Grain Millers. This locally owned company plans to build the largest oat processing facility on the west coast. This would enable our local farmers so they will have a market for their crops. And specifically, to transition from grass seed production to small grain production. The Board worked with all parties and a solution was found to allow the project to go forward.

And, the Board continued its support for human rights by sponsoring a day of remembrance of the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr. and passed a resolution opposing hate speech in our county.

Because of the Obama Administration's efforts to create the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, we were able to obtain and spend \$1.3 million to operate a youth summer jobs and career program. Three hundred and thirty seven youth were served under this program funded by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. This was the first summer program in the last 10 years!

Beyond all of that, the taxes got collected by our fine staff at Assessment and Taxation, criminals were prosecuted by our assistant District Attorneys, waste was reduced and managed by Waste Management, lives were literally saved by public health, young lives were improved at the Department of Youth Services and the dedicated employees and volunteers at Lane County government continued to give their best to members of our communities.

### **Challenges**

Lane County faces many challenges. I leave my year as chair of the Board realizing that these challenges remain. I'll mention a couple:

1) Obtaining reauthorization of federal forest funds guarantee. This is a crucial issue facing our county. As I mentioned, this funding source is scheduled to be completely gone in 2012. Commissioner Stewart and I will be going to Washington, D.C. in March to push for this reauthorization in our roles as members of the National Association of Counties public lands steering committee.

2) Carefully monitoring and responding to changes that the State government makes in the allocations to counties. As I mentioned, the State cut funding to Lane County in 09-10 and if Oregon voters defeat Measures 66 and 67 later this month, we will be in for more tough sledding.

It's been an honor and a pleasure to serve as your Chair of the Lane County Board of Commissioners in 2009. I'm sure I speak for the Board when I tell you that it is an honor to be elected and to serve the public in the role of Lane County Commissioner. I thank each and every one of you for your efforts to make Lane County a great place to live and work.

Now, it's my duty and great pleasure to introduce our Board Vice Chair, Commissioner Bill Fleenor, as he presents the other half of the State of the County remarks today. It's called "Looking Forward."

## **Looking Forward**

By Bill Fleenor

Vice Chair, Lane County Board of Commissioners

Good Morning... Chair Sorenson, Commissioners, esteemed guests and fellow community members.

As we start our New Year, our thoughts turn toward what the future may hold for our County... However, thinking about what lies ahead is not an easy task, but knowing who we are, and what we do, makes it a bit less daunting.

Lane County was established in 1851, and is geographically the size of the entire state of Connecticut. My West Lane District alone is the size of the entire state of Rhode Island. We currently have about 347,000 people who reside in 12 cities and rural areas.

From the coast to the cascades, Lane County is rich in scenic and resource diversity. It has a long history of culture that stretches way back beyond, and before the Wild West, where the abundant Camas bulb and the teaming wild salmon sustained indigenous populations for centuries.

But, what is Lane County's most precious resource today?

That answer is simple...

**It's the PEOPLE** who live here, and who make Lane County the best County in all of America! And, it's the 1,300-plus strong, dedicated Lane County government employees who help make this happen!

But what better reflection could there be, of the good people of Lane County, than a caring, responsive, effective, County government? A government that's central mission and goal is to protect residents, promote the general welfare and uphold our community's highest values.

Lane County government, through its hard working employees, provides several vital, indispensable and fundamental pillars of service that are essential for the life, safety and livability of her citizens.

Our life-saving calling has many hundreds of unsung county heroes, who make a difference every day, often without the public's awareness...

Who are some of our County heroes?

How about the lone deputy Sheriff, who patrols our highways late at night, or responds to a desperate community member's request for help? Who knows who's inside the stopped car or the troubled house on a dark night?

How about the youth services workers, parole and probation officers, prosecutors or mental health personnel...all working to save lives?

How about the emergency rescue teams, who risk their lives to save lives – the lives of community members stranded in a raging river, or a snow-filled forest?

How about the County's public works employees who keep county roads safe, risking their own lives in the process? Maintaining over 1,500 miles of paved roads and 450 bridges. Often in foul weather.

How about the Health and Human Services employee, who helps the desperate future mother, whose pregnancy is at risk? ...or, inoculates seniors against life threatening influenza? ...or, inspects our restaurants? ...or, averts a potential teenage suicide? ...or, who performs a multitude of other life-saving services?

**Who are some more, of the unsung heroes, who make a daily difference for the people of Lane County?**

Many take the early bus to work. They do all the many tasks to keep County operations running smoothly. ...They manage Lane County's diverse park system, and keep our parks safe and clean. ...They treat an injured dog or cat, trying to prevent unnecessary early deaths. ...They record births, deaths and deeds. They conduct our elections, run our County Fair, and process our garbage... In short...they perform hundreds of unglamorous, but vital tasks... unseen, mostly underappreciated. Yet, they are the heart and soul of Lane County government – your government, my government, our government. ...**And I salute them all.**

In order for us to efficiently and effectively provide essential public services, today, tomorrow and beyond, we must have appropriate, stable and reliable sources of revenue.

One such source of revenue has been our 'Timber Payments', also known as 'Secure Rural Schools'. In my opinion, the reauthorization of 'Secure Rural Schools', or some other iteration, **is the single greatest challenge facing Lane County today** – for without these stable 'Timber Payments', in lieu of the traditional timber harvest revenues, your County's ability to provide critical life protection services, such as jail beds and safe roads, will be radically degraded.

We will go from an annual high of about \$47 million in 'Timber Payments' down to less than \$3 million by the end of fiscal year 2012 - just two years away.. Just

as a basis of comparison, we collect just over \$33 million in property taxes per year.

These 'Timber Payments' have been paid to us, since the early 1990's, in lieu of the Federal government's **not** paying a single dime in property taxes on its extensive land holdings in Lane County, while at the same time, significantly reducing shared timber harvest revenues over the last two decades because of changing Federal forest management practices.

Our Oregon Congressional delegation, especially, Senators Wyden and Merkley, and Congressman DeFazio have committed to ensure the continuation of these payments. Even President Obama, on the campaign trail through Lane County in 2008, acknowledged how important maintaining this 150-year old sacred contract is to the health and safety of our community.

The very future of continued 'Timber Payments' beyond the year 2012, truly rests upon the shoulders of Congressman Peter DeFazio and Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley. If anyone can do it, I know they will succeed, and not let us down.

As community leaders, we must plan **not** just for the next year, **but for the next decade** -- it's our duty to always think of the next generation, not the next election. I believe the good people of Lane County want each of their commissioners to act as a budget hawk, not as a budget ostrich. They want their commissioners looking forward, and not lamenting what they should have done in retrospect. We cannot afford to make budgetary blunders due to improper planning or lack of fiscal discipline as we move into very uncertain economic times.

Looking forward, I can predict, Lane County will be forced to do more with less, as we have been doing over the last two decades. We've been stretching your hard earned tax dollar further than you can stretch taffy. Lane County only gets to keep 9 cents of every property tax dollar - not even single slice of the pie. In short, our challenge is to continue providing the best possible services, while living within our means, and receiving one of the **lowest** permanent property tax rates of all 36 Oregon counties, since Measures 5, 47 and 50 were passed in the 1990's.

However, working together, working smart, and working efficiently, we'll continue making Lane County the best possible place to live, work and raise our families. On a closing note, the late Oregon Governor, and Former Lane County Commissioner, Bob Straub, was fond of saying: "**My heart leaps like a deer whenever I cross back into that Lane County line.**"

Well folks, let's make sure that future generations feel that same way. Thank you for coming today and God bless you all.