



OFFICE OF THE SPEAKER OFFICE OF THE SENATE PRESIDENT

March 27, 2007

Contact: Russ Kelley (Speaker's Office), 503-986-1210

James Atkin (President's Office), 503-986-1604

Legislative Leaders To Tour Rural Oregon Counties

SALEM—House and Senate leaders today appointed a delegation to tour counties affected by the potential loss of federal dollars from the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act, commonly known as the “county payments” law. The act expired last year and Congress has not yet reauthorized the program.

Thirty-two of Oregon's 36 counties will lose federal dollars if the county payments program is not renewed. Some rural counties in Oregon rely on the program for more than sixty percent of their discretionary general funds.

“It is critical that legislators in Salem understand the challenges facing Oregon's rural counties so we can be better partners,” said House Speaker Jeff Merkley (D-Portland). **“We can do that best by getting out of the Capitol and learning about those challenges first hand.”**

The legislative delegation will tour Coos, Curry, Douglas, Josephine and Lane Counties April 19th through 21st. Those counties will be among the hardest hit by the loss of the county payment program. The delegation will meet with county commissioners and other community members to gain a better understanding of the scope of the problem and possible solutions.

“The loss of federal money is devastating to Oregon” said Senate President Peter Courtney (D-Salem/Gervais/Woodburn). **“I want to go out and talk to local officials about the impact to our state.”**

In February the Oregon House passed HJM 5, which calls on Congress to reauthorize and fund the county payments law. But more needs to be done to ensure Oregon's rural counties can continue normal operations. Even under the recently announced Congressional agreement, Oregon's counties would get just one additional year at full funding levels. After that, the payments will decline each year through 2011, when the new agreement ends. The plan has not passed either chamber.

“Senator Wyden and the whole Oregon delegation have done a superb job of putting this issue front and center on the agenda in Washington,” said Rep. Chuck Riley (D-Hillsboro). **“But Congress has given us every indication that the program will not continue forever. This is only a five year reprieve, and we need to help Oregon's rural counties establish a long-term plan for self-sufficiency.”**

(more)

The affected counties have made it clear that they are not seeking to be bailed out of the current situation with state funds. So far they have brought forward a number of remedies that do not involve state money, and have made suggestions about how counties might help themselves. The legislative delegation intends to explore those suggestions and engage in a discussion about shared responsibilities between counties and the state.

Courtney and Merkley will lead the Oregon Legislative delegation. From the House, members of the delegation will include Rep. Chuck Riley (D-Cornelius), chair of the House Committee on Government Accountability and Information Technology and vice-chair Fred Girod (R-Stayton); Rep. Phil Barnhart (D-Central Lane and Linn Counties), chair of the House Revenue Committee and vice-chair Tom Butler (R-Ontario); and Rep. Terry Beyer (D-Springfield), chair of the House Transportation Committee and vice-chair George Gilman (R-Medford).

The Senate delegation will include Senate Majority Leader Kate Brown (D-Portland); Senate Republican Leader Ted Ferrioli (R-John Day); chair of Senate Committee on Finance and Revenue Ryan Deckert (D-Beaverton), and vice-chair Gary George (R-Newberg); and chair of the Senate Committee on Business, Transportation, & Workforce Development Rick Metsger (D-Welches), and vice-chair Bruce Starr (R-Hillsboro).

For video of today's news conference, go to: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ch68Rw7R-0E>

###