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Political battle in Salem imperils public safety

By Mike Dugan / Bulletin guest columnist

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Public safety is being held hostage to the politics of partisan campaign rhetoric. Are you tough on crime or soft on crime? Can we make our opponent look weak for the next election cycle?

The House leadership put forth House Bill 3508 last week in an effort to be smart on crime and sensible with the public safety budget. HB 3508 provided for a phase-in of voter-approved Measure 57, the repeat property offender law. HB 3508 also provided for a 10 percent increase in earned time for good behavior for current and incoming prison inmates.

A sensible proposal that maintained critical public safety services, increased enforcement by adding Oregon State Police troopers, phased in the voter-approved repeat property offender law, protected drug treatment courts, and protected the Youth Authority training facility seems reasonably calculated to preserve our vital public safety programs.

– **Mike Dugan,**
Deschutes County District Attorney

The bill also found other savings, which would be used to shore up public safety in important areas. Notably, the additional savings would have been used to fund Oregon State Police and provide for 24/7 coverage across the state.

The budget-writing committee acknowledged a large hole in the public safety silo, almost \$34 million. In order to fill this hole, the decision was to find ways to save expenditures in some areas and protect as much as possible the public safety policies, or enact cuts that will deeply impact our safety. Identified as necessary cuts were \$5 million in the Oregon State Police Criminal Division by reducing up to 21 troopers; \$1.9 million in the State Police Crime Lab budget, eliminating up to 11 forensic lab positions; and almost \$1 million from the Oregon State Police fish and game enforcement, or about 25 percent of the total game enforcement program.

Additional cuts included the closure of the Oregon Youth Authority detention facility at Burns, saving \$6.2 million (closing the largest employer in Harney County), \$7 million by eliminating 76 close custody beds at the Hillcrest Youth Authority training school, and \$1.3 million in reducing the OYA parole and probation staff that supervises delinquent offenders.

Because HB 3508 would change the voter-approved repeat property offender act known as Ballot Measure 57, the Oregon Constitution requires a two-thirds majority to pass. Friday, the bill fell short by two votes in the House. Only two Republicans voted to pass HB 3508.

Their leadership sees a path of painting the other side as soft on crime. House District 53 Representative Gene Whisnant said he was awaiting input from his caucus leadership before committing to a vote. “Republicans,” he said, “are tough on crime, so it’s really tough for us to come off of that.” (Bulletin, June 19). He voted against the bill.

Tough on crime: The Republican vote will result in the loss of critically needed juvenile detention beds, the closure of one youth detention facility, the loss of Oregon State Police troopers, a diminished fish and game enforcement, the loss of drug court grants, a reduction in supervision for juvenile parole and probation, reduced assistance for crime victims, and the loss of critical Oregon State Police forensic scientists. How tough is that?

The political posturing engaged in to defeat HB 3508, in the end, hurts the public. By casting a no vote it was a clear message that the next election message is more important than balancing a budget while preserving a workable public safety program.

As district attorney in Deschutes County for over 20 years I can’t be accused of being “soft on crime.” I advocated for the passage of Ballot Measure 57 at a time when the state revenue forecast was far better than what we now face. These cuts will make my job much more difficult. Cases will be lost or dismissed because we do not have the resources to process the evidence. Some offenders will have to be released from jail because we can’t get them to trial in a timely fashion. I just completed a racketeering activity fish and game enforcement case. I know that losing 25 percent of the enforcement officers will diminish the protection of Oregon wildlife. If you want to be “tough on crime” you have to walk the walk, not just talk the talk.

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