



The Promise of Measure 57 Coalition

Individuals and Organizations Working Together to Find a Better Way to Fight Crime

promiseof57@gmail.com

Association of Oregon Community Mental Health Programs

The Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde

Human Services Coalition of Oregon

Juvenile Rights Project

League of Women Voters of Oregon

National Association of Social Workers, Oregon Chapter

Oregon Alliance of Children's Programs

Oregon Business Association

Oregon Criminal Defense Lawyers Association

Oregon Education Association

Oregon Prevention Education & Recovery Association

Partnership for Safety and Justice

SEIU, Local 503

Self Enhancement, Inc.

Stand for Children

The Oregonian

Let's suspend Measure 57 May 23, 2009

by **Chuck Sheketoff, guest opinion**

Oregon's day of reckoning is at hand. The Legislature has learned that, because of the economic crisis, it will have one-quarter less revenue than is needed just to maintain public services at their current level.

To their credit, the co-chairs of the Joint Ways and Means Committee last Monday started a desperately needed conversation about asking large, profitable corporations and wealthy households to solve the problem by contributing their fair share.

Yet even with the use of federal stimulus dollars and Oregon's rainy day reserves, they're still asking vulnerable Oregonians -- seniors, children, low-income families -- to suffer cuts to vital services they rely upon every day.

While the co-chairs played the unenviable role of Solomon in proposing what public services to save while balancing painful cuts and new revenue, they left unresolved whether to suspend implementation of Measure 57, the costly property-crime referral on last November's ballot.

There's no question that unshackling Oregonians from Measure 57 is the only sensible move.

It would not only restore some balance to our budget priorities, but also allow us to rethink the state's unsustainable trajectory in prison spending.

It's estimated that Measure 57 will cost the state \$75 million in the 2009-11 budget cycle. The bulk of the money would go toward locking up people convicted of property crimes. Only a portion would fund drug and alcohol treatment.

From its inception, Measure 57 was a solution in search of a problem. It certainly was not a response to Oregon's property crime rate, which has been steadily declining over the course of three decades and stood at a 40-year low as lawmakers typed up the voter referral.

Measure 57 was about politics. The previous Legislature sought to thwart the more draconian and more expensive Measure 61, for which Kevin Mannix served as a co-petitioner and spokesman. Like the notorious Bill Sizemore, Mannix is a repeat offender in promoting budget-hole ballot schemes financed by Nevada millionaire Loren Parks.

The "yes" on Measure 57 campaign sold it as a cheaper alternative that included the helpful dose of mental health and drug and alcohol treatment. The Mannix measure would have cost nearly twice as much as Measure 57 over the first five years.

HB 5005

DOC Budget

When they referred Measure 57 in early 2008, lawmakers -- like Mannix with Measure 61 -- failed to include a funding mechanism. At that time, however, the state's economic forecast wasn't predicting that the world's economy would go into a tailspin and state revenues would plummet.

But nose-dive they did, and in today's harsh economic and fiscal reality, implementing the measure would mean more critical public services will be harmed.

That intolerable situation was apparent to the co-chairs. While their proposed budget includes the cost of Measure 57, they simultaneously directed a "work group" of four lawmakers to find an equal amount of savings in our criminal justice system.

Delaying Measure 57 and changing sentencing laws are among the options the work group is required to consider. Those are the right priorities. Hopefully, the work group will find a way to tackle the long-term unsustainability of Oregon's corrections spending.

If the work group is thwarted by Mannix and his cronies, the result will be deeper cuts to public safety, education and health care, job training, long-term care and child care, cash and other assistance for the vulnerable in society.

Those areas comprise about 90 percent of the state budget and cannot escape another swipe of the budget ax if Measure 57 is held harmless. It's essential that the work group take bold steps that avoid further cuts to vital services and protect the long-term health of our families and our communities.

Oregon already tops all states in terms of the share of general fund dollars devoted to putting people behind bars, and it spends more on prisons than on higher education -- one of only four states in the nation to do so.

One of the bitterest ironies of Measure 57 is that, if implemented, it may end up making Oregonians less safe over the long run.

As Multnomah County District Attorney Michael Schrunk recently wrote in these pages ("Crime loses when kids are given an early start," May 2), research shows that investing in Head Start and other early childhood programs reduces crime.

But those important public services are not fully funded in the co-chairs' budget and could be reduced further if Measure 57's spending spree is not thwarted.

Like investments in early childhood education, spending on treatment for the mentally ill also prevents crime. Under-treatment for mental illness, Harvard researchers recently concluded, contributes to crime and incarceration. Here in Oregon, corrections officials report that half of all inmates suffer mental or emotional problems, and more than one in five is severely mentally ill.

And yet, if Measure 57 is allowed to soak up valuable tax dollars, funding for case management, medication management and other assistance to adults with major mental illness would be at risk. ...

It's said that a budget is -- or ought to be -- a moral document, a reflection of society's priorities. A silver lining to this severe economic downturn and revenue shortfall is that it's highlighted our out-of-balance priorities, in which the relentless growth of prison spending suffocates pressing needs of the vulnerable and our communities. The first step in correcting that imbalance is suspending Measure 57.

Charles Sheketoff is executive director of the Oregon Center for Public Policy in Silverton.