

Extension - Zeroed Out?

*By Charlotte Riersgard, OSU/Lane County Extension Staff Chair
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If you are one of the thousands of Lane County residents that depend on OSU/Lane County Extension for information, education and assistance, you may be disappointed to hear that changes are coming. County dollars for Extension, which account for about one-third of our budget, come from the county's general fund. Unless the federal Secure Rural Schools legislation (often known as timber money) is renewed, the general fund will be short \$43 million dollars. In this worst-case and likely scenario, the OSU/Lane County Extension could be zeroed out of the county budget.

Extension funding has been a cooperative agreement between Lane County government, the State of Oregon (through OSU Extension Service) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 set this funding model in place to bring University, research-based information to citizens all across each state. This federal legislation requires cooperation and financial contribution between all three players: county, state and federal. Every dollar Lane County gives Extension leverages about \$3 from state and federal funding. Federal funding from USDA supports the Nutrition Education Program. State funding supports faculty salaries and county funding covers daily operations (such as rent, support staff, computers, etc.).

Lane County Commissioners have worked tirelessly, against tough odds, to secure timber funds for Lane County and, along with the county management staff, have made a concerted effort to seek public input on budget challenges. The budget committee will have a series of meetings that include an opportunity for public comment, go to www.lanecounty.org/bcc for more information. The final budget will be completed and approved in early June. The county is required to have a balanced budget by June and must prepare it based on what funds are available. Assuming the loss of \$43 million to the general fund, many important services, Extension being one of them, may not receive any funding. These are tough decisions with tough outcomes.

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For the past 94 years, Extension faculty, staff and volunteers have been teaching and providing services throughout Lane County and collaborating with a wide variety of county agencies to enhance community services. Without a county funding partner, continuation of services is threatened. It's a fact of life – it takes money to stay open and offer services and educational programs and right now, the money is not there.

What does this mean for Extension? Well, as of late April, it means that we are trying to determine how, or if, we can operate without a third of our budget. We are trying to assess how to cut back and still be able to survive. We are considering down-sizing and restructuring. Or, the worst case scenario, we will be forced to close our doors. This is how serious it is for us right now. As this paper goes to press, we don't have definitive answers to those tough questions. We just have a willingness to problem solve and a commitment to the community and to the work we do. We realize that our supporters want answers too and when we know the outcome of the budget process (late May) and we've made our best salvage plan, we will communicate that with you, our clientele. If you want to help, stay informed and involved with the county budget process. Let your elected officials know about your priorities and share your ideas with us as we proceed.

Since 1914, Lane County residents have turned to the OSU/Lane County Extension Service to learn skills and gain information to improve their lives, their livelihoods and their communities. Extension faculty and staff offer information and educational programs that contribute to: land stewardship, a sustainable local food supply, organic gardening, water quality, food safety, healthy eating and physical activity, positive youth development, economic vitality, strong and healthy families, and community development. Extension's community work is greatly enhanced by the 850 Lane County residents who volunteer their time and skills. We want to be here, working for you, for the next 94 years!