

Wyden: Funding will be restored

But county officials brace for cuts, layoffs

BY JOE HAPP

Headlight-Herald Staff

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said last week he is optimistic that federal timber money for counties in western states, including Tillamook County, eventually will be restored. But he declined to predict how long it would take because of the current stalemate between President Bush and Congress over the Iraq war.

Tillamook County officials, meanwhile, are assuming the money won't be there by the time they have to finalize a budget later this spring and they are bracing for cutbacks and layoffs.

The funding — including \$1.8 million earmarked for the Tillamook County Road Department, as well as other money for the county's general fund, the Sheriff's Office and the county's three school districts — was part of a \$400 million extension of the Secure Rural School and Community Self-



**SEN. RON
WYDEN**

Secure Rural School and Community Self-Determination Act that Congress tacked on to a \$124 billion supplemental spending bill for continuing the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Bills passed in the U.S. House and Senate set differing timetables for withdrawing troops from the region and the president has threatened to veto any legislation requiring a withdrawal date. A House-Senate conference committee must reconcile the two bills before anything is sent to the president.

“There will be a lot of sparring between Congress and the White House on this,” Wyden said Friday during a press conference in Medford, “but, at some point, a bill must be signed because it’s important to get money for our troops.”

The source of Wyden’s optimism, he said, was an agreement reached in the Senate to extend funding for the counties for another five years. That amendment was approved by a vote of 75-23.

“We’re well positioned on this issue,” he said. “Seventy-five votes in the Senate is an army. We’re going to get this done. Many communities are depending on this.”

Wyden said he is hoping the House can be

WYDEN

Continued from Page A1

persuaded to go along with the Senate version.

"We're very much aware of the hardships being endured right now," he added. As he spoke, officials in Jackson County, where the federal dollars are used to fund county libraries, were padlocking all 15 library branches in the county system.

Tillamook County Commission Chairman Mark Labhart said Friday that, after an initial round of budget sessions with county department heads last week, "the budget is \$4.5 million out of whack."

Labhart said department heads presented their "wish lists" to commissioners in those meetings and that County Treasurer Karen Dye is scheduled to present a budget April 23.

Without passage of legislation extending the federal payments, the county, Labhart said, will be without:

- \$1.8 million in funding for the County Road Department, which amounts to 44 percent of its budget;
- \$550,000 from the county's general fund;
- \$64,000 for Sheriff's Office search and rescue operations and training;

- \$17,500 in funding for the Tillamook County Outdoor School;
- \$51,571 for the local Oregon State University Extension Service 4-H forestry program;
- \$90,000 in federal Title III funds for the Tillamook School District's natural resources program, and
- \$595,000 in other federal funds for the Tillamook, Nestucca Valley and Neah-Kah-Nie school districts, which would have to be made up with money from the state's general fund.

Labhart said the situation could soon result in four layoffs in the road department and possibly as many as a dozen more next year. The department currently has 31 employees.

In 2000, Congress passed the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act to make up for the shared revenue that timber counties lost when logging in federally-owned forests was curtailed. Last year, the Republican-led Congress did not reauthorize it, putting Oregon in jeopardy of losing more than \$280 million. The law expired in September and counties received their last checks in December.

Under that program, Oregon has received more than \$1 billion in federal funds. The state received \$282 million last year.