

Counties win a one-year reprieve

**With Safety Net renewal,
Tillamook County will take
a fresh look at its budget**

KEN O'TOOLE

Headlight-Herald Staff

With U.S. House and Senate approval and President Bush's signature last week, the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act (in-lieu-of-timber-harvest payments to Oregon and 38 other states) has been extended for one more year.

This means Tillamook County — and 32 other counties in Oregon — have another year to prepare for the potential that these payments may ultimately be reduced or not renewed.

The so-called Safety Net payment program, begun in 2000, that played a significant part in the budgets of many counties — including Tillamook County — for the past six years expired last September. An earlier attempt at renewal legislation was vetoed by President

See PAYMENTS, Page A16

PAYMENTS

Continued from Page A1

Bush because of its links to a timetable to troop withdrawal from Iraq.

Without passage of legislation extending the federal payments for one year, Tillamook County would have been 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.

The one-year Safety Net restoration is good news, but it is still only a short-term solution, said County Commission Chair Mark Labhart.

"It buys us one year," he said.

The next step for the commissioners, he said, should be a meeting with county Public Works Director Liane Welch before the county's new fiscal year budget is adopted later in June.

Faced with the uncertainty of renewed federal Safety Net funding, Welch has been paring back and consolidating department operations. Four Public

Works positions have gone unfilled in the next fiscal year budget.

Her budget assumed the Safety Net funding would not be renewed, and calls for paving only about 3 miles of county roads in the next fiscal year.

County payment checks should be arriving this fall, according to Eric Schmidt of Association of Oregon Counties. The amounts received by the states for distribution to counties will be "equal to the amount received in 2006," he said.

But he, too, stressed that it's just a one-year fix, and noted that Oregon's congressional delegation is working on trying to secure a lengthier extension of county payments.

He said U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden has vowed that he and Nevada Sen. Harry Reid "will attach it (a five-year extension) to every appropriate revenue measure." In addition, he said, the House delegation is working with the House Speaker's Office on "achieving some kind of discussion about county payments at the House level."

What's more, Schmidt said, both Oregon Congressmen Peter DeFazio and Greg Walden are co-sponsors of a four-year extension bill that is still alive in the House, and he said U.S. Sen. Gordon Smith has said he will do what he can to influence the White House on the issue.

He pointed out one potential problem, though — "a lot of urban politicians are also wondering why there can't be a 'secure urban schools act.'"

"We in the House have long recognized the vital importance of the Secure Rural Schools program to Oregon's counties," said Congressman Earl Blumenauer. "Our commitment to reauthorizing this program has

never wavered. Whether Republicans or Democrats control the House, we will continue to work as a bipartisan team to get this done. It appears that we will be successful in obtaining a one-year extension and we will continue to work with our friends in the Senate and people back home on a longer-term solution."

"Given the defeat of local tax measures around the state last week, it's clear that rural counties need this assistance more than ever," DeFazio said. "This funding will help stave-off some of the layoffs and cuts in critical services like law-enforcement and health care, and prevent the state from having to take over those essential services, while we continue to work together on a longer-term solution."

"Two months ago a one-year extension for county payments seemed completely out of the question,"

Congressman Walden said. "Would I have rather had a multi-year extension? Of course. But now the bipartisan work to secure a long-term extension and reauthorization of these funds must continue. We will not relent. The Congress will be forced to address this issue over and over and over again until we reach agreement on a long-term solution."

"This is an immediate win for our counties," said Congresswoman Darlene Hooley. "This emergency funding bill will address the current crisis and give immediate relief of hundreds of millions of dollars to our rural counties."

She added that "mapping out a long-term solution" is the next step.

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.

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