

Dear Business Leader:

All of us were taught in school that our government has three equal yet separate branches – the executive, legislative and judicial branch. Each branch of government performs a core function necessary for the efficient administration of law and order in our society.

Each branch of government is equally important. Each branch of government is equally necessary. And each branch of government equally shares the responsibility to maintain an orderly society.

Unfortunately, in Oregon, the three branches of government are not funded equally.

Over the last decade, as state revenues have fluctuated and state agencies have been forced to tighten their belts, Oregon's court system has been cut as well. Because some court expenses, such as judicial salaries, may not be legally reduced, these cuts have had a disproportionate impact on the remaining court budget. These cuts led to court closures, staff reductions and furloughs while demand has risen. Oregon 5 years ago laid off court reporters, judicial assistants, and referee judges who handle traffic, small claims, and criminal matters.

We write to you today to ask for your public support for an appropriate level of funding for Oregon's courts.

In Oregon, the courts have become more efficient. Our court system today is lean – managing an increasing complex caseload with fewer employees. Like many businesses however, it is not always possible to simply assign more duties to the remaining staff when budget cuts hit. The docket clerk in the small claims department will have much to learn if assigned an additional probate or criminal caseload. The courts are making do with fewer resources, but there are limits to how thin resources can be stretched. You can't do 120 hours worth of work in a week if you only have two employees to do it.

Make no mistake – appropriately funding Oregon courts is an issue that matters to Oregon businesses. Consider this: in the hierarchy of cases on the court's docket, the Constitution requires criminal cases be handled first. Next on the list are typically those cases involving child welfare and/or the safety of a person from an abusive situation. Further down on the list are cases like civil disputes, small claims and evictions. As court funding continues to be reduced, and resources become less available, the courts will be forced to dedicate their resources to cases at the top of the list, which means those cases at the bottom could be even further delayed.

Those cases at the bottom of the list that are typically the ones that impact businesses – perhaps your business – most directly. Further cuts will hurt our already weakened court system by limiting access to justice, and creating an increasingly “wild west” business climate where

resolution of disputes is unpredictable. Justice delayed could become justice denied for businesses in Oregon. Such increased uncertainty needlessly risks jobs and economic prosperity.

Oregon courts must be appropriately funded to ensure access to justice to all Oregonians. The public must trust the commitment of its courts to fairness, to the timely and efficient resolution of disputes, and to an open court system accessible to all. Courts ensure public safety, protect vulnerable citizens, and resolve the problems of families in crisis. The court system has historically accepted budget cuts with the other branches of government, but the courts have reached a point with court closures and staff reductions where access to justice will no longer exist for businesses or individuals.

As we begin the 2017 legislative session, we are asking for your commitment to help us maintain an appropriate level of funding for Oregon's courts.