

Hands off our jail

A bill to shift state prisoners to county jails is ill-conceived and unfair

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Ordinarily we would applaud any effort by state lawmakers to find a way to deliver a government service for less money, especially when the state's income is less than its expenses. But when legislators' answer is to shift a burden from state government to county governments, we draw the line.

The tactic is as old as government itself: Can't afford to continue providing a vital service at the state level? Foist it off on local government.

Gov. John Kitzhaber's proposed budget would cut the state Department of Corrections' funding by 3.4 percent. The decrease would leave the department unable to continue providing services at the current level.

Existing law states that prisoners sentenced to one year or less behind bars will serve their terms in county jail. Those drawing sentences of longer than one year are sent to state prison.

Senate Bill 728 would increase that one-year limit to two years.

The Senate Judiciary Committee estimates there are 1,000 beds going unused in county jails around the state.

There may well be, but not in Jackson County.

Jackson County Sheriff Mike Winters says his jail already released 300 prisoners early this year because of overcrowding — a perennial problem in this county.

Klamath County Sheriff Tim Evinger says he has empty beds, but he doesn't have the budget to fully staff the jail. Paying Klamath County enough to hire more jail staff would likely wipe out any savings to the state. Not paying Klamath County would simply be unfair.

Another wrinkle in SB 728 has to do with the cost of incarcerating each prisoner. The state spends about \$84 a day to house the average prisoner, according to the Department of Corrections. The idea is that county jails can do the job for less money.

But that isn't necessarily the case. Winters notes his cost is \$70 to \$100 a day depending on each prisoner's needs. Other county sheriffs say their costs can range as high as \$150 a day because state prisons enjoy economies of scale that are not present in smaller county lockups.

Assuming the state shifted prisoners to county jails and paid the counties some amount less than its own cost of \$84 a day, there still would be the cost of transporting prisoners to the nearest county jail with vacancies, and the payments probably wouldn't cover the counties' cost per inmate.

At a time when Oregon counties — especially rural ones — are strapped for funds themselves, shifting

more costs from the state level is not the answer.

Legislators and Corrections Department officials will have to find another way to absorb a 3.4 percent budget reduction.