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Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Public Safety
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: SB 5512: Morrow County Request for Courthouse Construction Funds

This letter is written in support of the submitted funding request for a new courthouse for Morrow County.

I am the Manager of an eight-attorney member defense consortium, Blue Mountain Defenders, LLC. My organization is contracted with Oregon Public Defense Services to provide indigent public defense services for both Morrow and Umatilla Counties. We are the only defense contractor for Morrow County.

I have been engaged in defense services in Morrow County for the last twenty-six years, and am very familiar with the shortcomings of the present Morrow County courthouse. It is wholly inadequate for many reasons.

Designed by architect Edgar M. Lazarus and constructed between 1902-1903, the Morrow County courthouse is a quaint old building on the National Register of Historic Places. However, this 82 feet x 51 feet two story stone structure cannot meet the modern requirements of a Circuit Court that handles all levels of criminal cases.

Because of its designation as an historic place, few physical modifications are permitted. The old flimsy wooden doors are not conducive to sound control, as echoes of voices drowned each other out in the echoey narrow hallway. The only jury room, just off the only courtroom, has to run a white noise machine every time the jury is sent out, to avoid jurors hearing what is being said in the courtroom.

If discussions are needed between a defense counsel and his client, there is literally nowhere to meet. Attorneys typically sit on a chair in the hallway, if one of the five little wooden chairs happens to be available, to try to have a "confidential" discussion with the client. During Jury trials, there is virtually no such conversation possible, unless one goes outside and tries to locate a spot away from a passing juror or witness.

The 120-year-old courtroom is an echo chamber of fading plaster, lead paint, and asbestos materials. The sound system is pathetic, and subject to frequent maintenance requests. The small jury box can barely squeeze in 12 jurors, and jury selection is a cumbersome process in serious felony matters.

Criminal cases are ever increasing in Morrow County, with a commensurate increasing court docket, that puts additional strains on the limited court resources.

Morrow County needs a modern courthouse facility. I have often been concerned that fairness of the process is compromised for our clients, when having to try to function in a facility that does not foster the confidentiality, security, and modern amenities that should be afforded to all parties in criminal proceedings.

A new courthouse for Morrow County is long overdue. While Eastern Oregon is so often overlooked in matters of State funding, I am hopeful the Committee will carefully consider and grant the funding request. It is a reasonable and worthy investment.

Respectfully submitted,



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Manager, Blue Mountain Defenders, LLC