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Peter Courtney's Earthquake Safety Legacy

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Oregon loses a hero--Oregon's legendary earthquake safety champion, Oregon Senator Peter Courtney, passed away on July 16, 2024 (figure 1).

As a committed advocate for children and earthquake preparedness, Senator Peter Courtney leaves behind a legacy that will protect children and their communities from earthquake hazards for generations. Of more than 200 bills sponsored by Courtney that became law, over a dozen were dedicated to improve earthquake safety to Oregonians. His efforts led to earthquake improvements to over 500 critical public buildings, including schools, fire stations, hospitals, 911 call centers and the Oregon State Capitol Building.



Figure 1. Senate President Peter Courtney in front of the Oregon State Capitol

Source: Peter Courtney

I recall distinctly my first meeting with Senator Peter Courtney (figure 2). It was in 1999 at Western Oregon University, where he served as an administrator, and I was there to brief him on the sobering estimated damage and loss figures from my statewide Cascadia earthquake study. At that time, he was a new member of the Oregon Seismic Safety Policy Advisory Commission (OSSPAC) and I was the incoming chair. We compared earthquakes experiences-- I described being in the 1989 World Series (aka Loma Prieta) earthquake while he described the 1993 spring break quake in Scotts Mills, Oregon. Although the 1993 quake was only a magnitude 5.6, it destroyed the Mollala High School (an unreinforced masonry building (URM)) and damaged the historic St Paul's church (another URM) as well as the dome of the State Capitol (you guessed it, a URM).



Figure 2. Senate President Peter Courtney at the Earthquake Engineering Research Institute Annual Meeting with Yumei Wang. Source: Rob Olshansky (2005)

At OSSPAC, we got busy preparing for a Cascadia megaquake. Senator Courtney was instrumental in creating laws that require earthquake drills, that require public schools to be seismically safe, and emergency response facilities to be better prepared to provide service in the aftermath of earthquakes.

He explained that, due to the high costs of seismic retrofits, a public vote on a possible constitutional change to allow legislative funding for grants was warranted. In November 2002, the public voted on Senator Courtney's ballot measures 15 and 16 in support of increasing legislative authority for this purpose (figure 3). To date, over \$770 million of state grant funds have been allocated to seismically upgrade deficient schools and emergency response facilities, protecting 100,000s Oregonians. And, thanks to Senator Peter Courtney's commitment, Oregon's seismic rehabilitation grant program will continue to improve community safety.

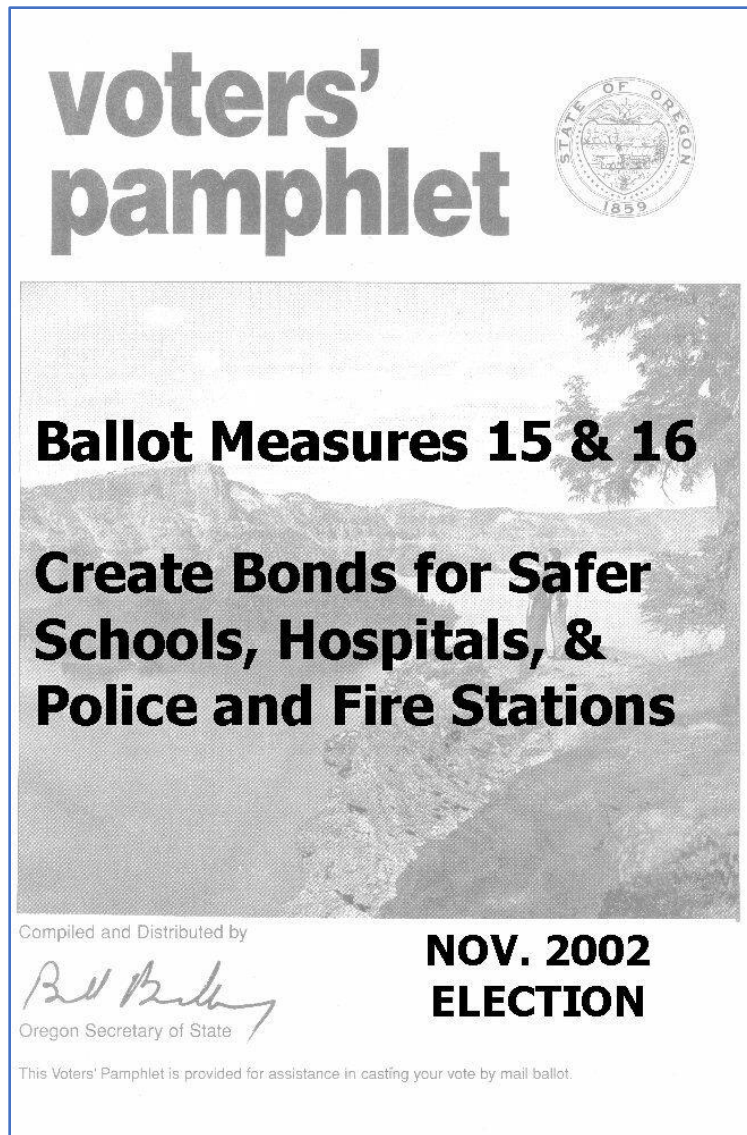


Figure 3. 2002 Voters pamphlet with earthquake ballot measures, which passed into law

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