



# MALHEUR COUNTY

COUNTY COURT

251 B Street West #5, Vale, Oregon 97918 Phone (541) 473-5124 Fax (541) 473-5576

January 29, 2025

Subject: Malheur County Courthouse Planning Funds Request  
(OJD Budget Bill 5012, Policy Option Package 118)

Members of the Way and Means Subcommittee on Public Safety,

In the Malheur County Courthouse, overcrowding is rampant, with courtrooms overflowing and essential security features lacking. This outdated facility severely hinders the efficient administration of justice, creating delays, inefficiencies, and a disservice to all who rely on the court system. Overcrowding is a chronic issue, forcing judges to juggle cases in cramped quarters, sacrificing efficiency for mere feasibility, and undermining the very foundation of a fair and accessible justice system.

Malheur County has the highest poverty rate in the state of Oregon, hovering over 20%. The weight of poverty shouldn't be an additional hurdle to seeking justice. Yet, without significant state investment, the county simply cannot shoulder the immense cost of constructing a courthouse that meets the community's needs. The Chief Justice seeks \$250,000 in the 2025 Oregon Legislative Session to plan for and design a new courthouse. This is not just an investment in bricks and mortar; it's an investment in the future of the 9<sup>th</sup> Judicial District, a promise of justice delivered with dignity and respect.

We write in support of the Chief's request. Malheur County will partner with the state to fast-track the implementation of a new courthouse. This is not a quick fix; it's a long-term commitment. We urge you to join us in building a courthouse that reflects the values of the State of Oregon – a place where justice stands tall, a beacon of hope in the heart of our community.

## **Current Challenges**

*Judicial Capacity* Malheur County faces a critical judicial resource shortage. The 9<sup>th</sup> Judicial District currently has two courtrooms, but only one courtroom that can meet the full needs of a judicial officer. Courtroom 2, due to its small size, cannot accommodate a jury trial. According to the National Center for State Court Workload Study, Malheur has a 50% deficiency in judicial resource. Only one other judicial district has a higher need of judicial resources. Essentially, Malheur County needs 3 judges and it currently has 1.5 courtrooms. The district's infrastructure hinders its capacity. This shortage significantly impacts the judicial system's ability to deliver timely justice, as acknowledged by the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission in its Senate Bill 337

report. The Commission noted that the "limiting judicial infrastructure" of the 9th Judicial District significantly restricts the "district's case processing capacity."

*Staff Capacity* The 9th Judicial District is crippled by a 14% staff shortage, ranking it a dismal third from last in the entire state. This critical understaffing is further compounded by the utterly insufficient space available for our hardworking team. Crammed into inefficient cubicles, our staff, including management, lack the room to efficiently process casework, store mountains of files, or even meet with members of the public in private. This unacceptable situation is hindering the court's ability to serve the community effectively. We urge immediate action to address this staffing and space crisis before it further erodes public trust and confidence in the 9th Judicial District.

*Jury Capacity* Far from having dedicated jury assembly rooms, the 9th Judicial District operates with just one courtroom for jury trials. This forces potential jurors to mingle nervously in public areas, often alongside defendants, victims, and attorneys from cases they may soon preside over. They sit shoulder-to-shoulder with witnesses and may even pass in-custody defendants. This lack of privacy raises serious concerns about potential juror bias, as they may inadvertently hear information about unrelated cases that could influence their deliberations.

*Dependency Needs* Malheur County has the second highest rate of filing of dependency cases per capita in the state. These important cases typically involve four to six parties to a proceeding. Imagine a courtroom so small that participants in crucial child welfare cases must take turns attending. Crammed into a room barely able to accommodate the families and legal representatives, these families seeking justice for their vulnerable children face another hurdle: the lack of privacy. Confidential conversations are forced into the open hallway, jeopardizing the safety and well-being of those they're meant to protect. This outdated facility is an affront to justice in Malheur County. We need a courthouse that prioritizes the privacy and dignity of families navigating these critical cases.



*Cultural Needs* Malheur County's agricultural backbone attracts a significant population of non-English speakers, yet our court facilities struggle to meet their cultural and practical needs. Large, close-knit families, a cornerstone of our agricultural communities, often find themselves cramped and ill-equipped in our limited courtrooms. Finding privacy for family consultations or confidential discussions with interpreters and attorneys proves nearly impossible amidst the cramped public areas. Expanding court facilities to accommodate larger families and provide dedicated spaces for private consultations would not only serve our diverse community but also ensure equal access to justice.

*Border Issues* Ontario, Oregon, Malheur County's largest city, sits on the Idaho Border. Ontario's day-time population swells to an estimated 30,000, dwarfing its resident base of around 10,000. This is primarily due to an influx of employees entering Oregon for higher wages, and Idaho residents seeking legalized marijuana and tax-free shopping. Fueled by employers like the massive Snake River Correctional Institution, more than half of Malheur County's workforce commutes from Idaho, draining local resources without corresponding local tax revenue. This influx strains public safety, with officers stretched thin and court resources overloaded.

Recognizing this burden, the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission's Senate Bill 337 report highlighted the disproportionate caseload Malheur County judges face, exceeding any other judicial district by over 100 cases per judge involving public defense. The report echoed the urgent need for bolstering Malheur County's judicial infrastructure within the 9th Judicial District to improve case disposition efficiencies and ensure public safety.

*Holding Facilities* Malheur County Circuit Court lacks a dedicated holding room for inmates appearing for trial, a critical safety concern. This means inmates, including those from Snake River Correctional Institution, are currently detained in the jury room – the same space where jurors deliberate and triples as the judicial staff lunchroom. This unacceptable situation compromises the integrity of both trial proceedings and juror safety. Urgent action is needed to address this critical gap and ensure the proper facilities are available for all parties involved in the justice system.



**Conclusion:**

Malheur County supports the Chief Justice's request for an appropriation of \$250,000 from the state legislature for the planning and design of the new courthouse for the 9<sup>th</sup> Judicial District. The construction of a new courthouse in Vale, Oregon is a necessity. It is an investment in our community's future, ensuring equal access to justice, enhancing public safety, and promoting economic development. We urge you to approve this critical funding request and allow Malheur County to build a courthouse worthy of its citizens and the pursuit of justice. We are confident that this investment will pay dividends for decades to come.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dan P. Joyce".

Dan Joyce  
County Judge  
Malheur County

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ron Jacobs".

Ron Jacobs  
County Commissioner  
Malheur County

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Mendiola".

Jim Mendiola  
County Commissioner  
Malheur County