

# Union County Emergency Services



**Nick Vora, Emergency Manager**  
nvora@union-county.org

1106 K Avenue, La Grande, OR 97850

PHONE (541) 963-1009 • FAX (541) 963-1079

April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025

RE: House Bill 2527 Testimony

Chairs Lieber and Sanches, Vice Chairs Girod, Gomberg, and Smith, and Members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of HB 2527. For the record, my name is Nick Vora, and I am the Emergency Manager for Union County Oregon.

HB2527 would be a permanent fix to close a major gap in our regional emergency response and disaster resilience infrastructure by facilitating the restoration of bathroom and sanitation facilities at the Union County Fairgrounds facility.

The Union County Fairgrounds facilities are of critical importance to Union County's – and by association the State's - emergency preparedness as I will explain below. Without working restrooms, or even a sink where someone can wash their hands, the ability of this critical site to support a local or statewide emergency is substantially, and in some cases completely, inhibited.

## **General Concepts:**

- All emergencies start and end at the local level, and to withstand and recover from a disaster, Union County needs facilities in place to not only respond to and manage the incident, but also care for people and their animals that get displaced.
- The Union County Fairgrounds are the only site in Union County at the immediate disposal of local government with a large parking area, animal pens, and other infrastructure necessary for supporting emergency evacuations of people and animals displaced from both urban and rural areas.
- ***Funding from HB 2527 to provide working toilets and sanitation facilities at the Union County Fairgrounds will be critical to allow the fairgrounds to support Union County and the State of Oregon in an emergency.***

## **Ownership and flexibility**

- Unlike schools, armories, or private facilities, the Union County Fairgrounds can be made immediately available for during a local emergency. Investment into private facilities can be permanently lost if the facility is closed, repurposed, or sold. Other facilities such as school campuses are well-suited for some emergency uses, but have limited or no availability during much of the year and are not under county control.

## **Livestock and Pets**

- The Union county Fairgrounds are the **only** publicly accessible facility under government ownership in Union County that can hold livestock during emergencies. The Union County Fairgrounds were used to board evacuated livestock from Western Oregon during the 2020 Labor Day fires, highlighting the state-wide value of these unique facilities.
- Keeping livestock at a facility without working toilets, or even a sink to wash hands, not only limits the utility of the facility, but also presents a health and disease risk. Passage of HB 2527 will completely and permanently solve this problem.

## **Emergency Shelters**

- The Union County Fairgrounds are one of the very few local facilities capable of immediately housing displaced people, or housing people for an extended period of time, as use of any other facilities for a shelter displaces the normal user/occupant. Without working bathrooms, the Union County Fairgrounds will be unable to function in this much-needed capacity during an emergency.
- During severe weather events that require counties to open warming, cooling, or air quality shelters, the Union County Fairgrounds is one of the very few, if only, locations that local government has access to for quickly meeting the needs of the community.

## **Incident Response and Support**

- The Union County Fairgrounds are the only facility near La Grande (the largest city in Union County) capable of supporting an incident management team, but until working bathrooms are restored, this capability is entirely dependent on the availability of portable toilets.
- The Union County Fairgrounds are one of very few locations with adequate traffic handling for drive-through clinics and materials handling to serve as delivery, staging, and distribution sites (caches) for equipment and supplies during and following emergencies. The facility was used extensively for the County's COVID response, but the absence of restrooms presented a substantial challenge.

## **Disaster Economics**

- All emergencies start and end at the local level, and recovery planning has to start before a disaster happens to be as successful and efficient as possible. We cannot fully mitigate all disasters and therefore must be prepared to respond to and recover from the inevitable. Investment in facilities such as the Union County Fairgrounds that will support a comprehensive effort to not only manage the incident, but also care for the community and be a focal point for recovery efforts will help speed and organize the recovery process, and thereby reduce costs to private individuals and all levels of government during and after the incident.

## Secondary Benefits

- While planned investments are focused on emergency response and evacuation sheltering, expanded fairground capabilities will also serve as much-needed conference venues, benefiting local economies.
- Private facilities often charge fixed rates regardless of the user, which makes it very difficult for local governments to find facilities to host trainings and emergency preparedness exercises on our very limited budgets.
- Fairground facilities are often needed to support animal welfare enforcement, as local governments often need locations to temporarily house animals for treatment and evidence processing on abuse and neglect cases. Privately-owned or operated facilities cannot necessarily be relied on to provide this function.

I appreciate your time and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Sincerely,



Nick Vora  
Emergency Manager  
Director, Dept. of Emergency Services  
Union County, OR