

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### What does the County do for me?

The County's employees ensure your personal safety, protect your property from theft, vandalism and wildfires; provide safe roads and bridges to get you in, out and around the community; safe restaurants, pools and hot tubs; and food, shelter and clothing when necessary. The staff at youth services helps at-risk kids move toward positive activities and lifestyles.

The County is the only local government that provides:

- Jail for felony offenders and other corrections programs
- Prosecution of felony offenses
- Parole and probation
- Juvenile crime services
- Alcohol/drug/sex offender treatment
- Public health (communicable disease control, immunizations)
- Animal regulation
- Mental health services
- Property tax collection and distribution to cities, schools and other districts
- Services for people with developmental disabilities
- Environmental health (inspections of restaurants, pools, spas)
- Family law/mediation/child support payments
- Vital records, including marriage licenses, birth/death certificates, deeds
- Victim services

County employees deliver a wide array of mandated services for the state and federal governments, which rely on county government to efficiently use funds for services that benefit those less fortunate, especially children.

### How's the County Budget Set?

The Lane County Leadership Team (commissioners, department heads, County administrator) reviews budget needs and forecasts for the next five years. It forwards recommendations to the County Administrator's office, which then proposes a budget. A Budget Committee comprised of five citizens and five commissioners meets, discusses the budget and sends a recommended budget to the Board of Commissioners. Public hearings inform the commissioners, who then vote to adopt a budget. The County budget must be balanced: expenditures can't exceed revenues.

### Where does Lane County get its money?

Hundreds of revenue sources support Lane County's services. Local property taxes provide about six percent of the County's budget, which exceeds \$475 million.

- About 70 percent of the services are self-supporting. State, federal or local sources provide funding that is restricted for specific programs and services.
- Of the total budget, only 12 percent can be spent at the County's discretion each year. About half of those funds come from property taxes.
- Property taxes are the main source of funds for sheriff's patrols, prosecution, county jail, juvenile probation and detention, communicable disease control, and administrative services that support all of the County's operations.

## Pay my property taxes to Lane County. How are they used?

Although you write your check to Lane County Assessment and Taxation, most of the dollars actually go to 80 other districts such as schools, cities, fire/EMS, libraries, etc. Lane County collects and distributes the property taxes to them as a service. From each dollar you send in, Lane County Government receives about nine cents to provide essential services like public health, public safety, youth services, animal regulation, elections, and others.



*“As far as keeping the County financially stable the last two years, you’ve done an excellent job. Given the challenges the county has faced financially, you are not running the ship into the ground, so to speak.”*

- Jim Lanzarotta,  
 Moss Adams  
 (County’s external auditing firm)

## If the County generates more taxes because the value of property increases, why is the County’s budget so tight?

Regardless of the rise in real market property values in Lane County, assessed property values increase no more than 3 percent per year max. That’s because property taxes were capped by statewide initiative in the 1990s, locking Lane County’s rate in at \$1.28 per thousand of property values, plus no more than 3 percent increase in assessed values (plus new construction values) each year. Simultaneously, federal forest policy changed, timber harvests declined and Lane County’s funding from natural resources plummeted.



Those events have created a profound structural tax deficit for Lane County. Its permanent tax rate is frozen at a level much below that of other counties of its size. It is a rate that is very low for a general-purpose government. The cost of providing public services increases between 5 and 6 percent per year, yet the County’s taxes are capped at 3 percent growth per year. By law the County must adopt a balanced budget, so it must cut services every year to live within its means.

No legal mechanism exists for Lane County to increase its permanent tax rate, which is \$1.28 per thousand dollars of assessed valuation. It’s a rate more typical of a special district, like the Coburg Rural Fire Protection District, with a rate of \$1.33 per thousand dollars. Lane County has the second lowest tax rate among all Oregon counties. Other counties of similar population like Marion and Washington are at \$3.1 and \$3.3 per thousand respectively. Eugene and Springfield have property tax rates that are substantially higher than Lane County’s. Eugene is at \$7 per thousand and Springfield at \$6.71 per thousand and yet the cities only serve a segment of the population.

## How does Lane County live within its means?

Lane County is one of the leanest counties in the state, with a tax rate lower than 34 of the 36 other counties. Over the last two decades, the county's population has grown by 21 percent, while the number of county employees has dropped by 13 percent.

The county has made many cuts to services, programs and personnel. The county cannot cut mandated services or those that are funded by dedicated revenues from other governments. It has no choice but to cut programs covered by the discretionary portion of its budget.



That has resulted in cuts to the sheriff's patrol and other public safety programs, which use between 60 and 65 percent of that resource.

In 2007, Lane County operated 109 fewer jail beds than it did in 2002, didn't prosecute most property crimes, doubled the caseloads assigned to parole and probation officers, operated youth services at one-third of its capacity, and was slowly dismantling many public health and safety services. Living within limited means has a cost.

## How is Lane County addressing factors that increase cost?

Healthcare and retirement benefits are costly. Healthcare costs are rising for everyone. Lane County has worked successfully with its unions to contain health care costs as much as possible while honoring prior agreements. The County asked its insurance agency to investigate pooling health care benefits with other jurisdictions. The agency determined Lane County's rate is lower than the State of Oregon's employee health care plan on a per-employee basis.

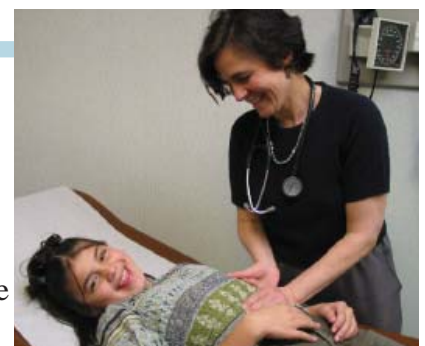


Retirement benefits are provided through PERS. Once in PERS, governments cannot opt out by state law. Lane County has taken aggressive steps to address the costs of PERS, such as:

- Bonding its unfunded liability to take advantage of favorable interest rates
- Pushing for legal remedies in court
- Seeking statutory remedies at the legislature
- Pushing for administrative remedies in front of the PERS Board
- Continuing to work through the courts and with legislators.

## In terms of employees, how lean is Lane County?

Following two decades of cuts, fewer employees have more work to do. Today there are 200 fewer employees working for 65,000 more citizens than in 1980. Most local cities follow the established ratio for supervisors to employees of 1 to 5 or 1 to 6. Lane County operates with one supervisor for 12 employees. Because many departments have too few staff, they have to cut hours of operations and reduce counter service to the public.



## Can't we make the county programs more self-supporting?

Lane County has aggressively sought to make programs self-supporting. Lane County annually reviews all fees through the Finance and Audit Committee and raises them when feasible. Since the early 1990s, the County has identified as many programs as possible, such as parks, land management, and the landfill, that can be largely self-supporting through fees. Citizens regularly voice concerns that Lane County has maxed out its ability to raise fees. Lane County has looked for consolidation opportunities with other agencies and will continue to do so.



## What efforts has Lane County made to address credibility and trust?

Lane County has formed citizen task forces to help create a Strategic Plan, prioritize services, and look at public safety. The County instituted performance management and will be issuing a report card each year. It is an open government with public meetings that are televised, webcast and archived on the web. The County distributes recaps of commissioner meetings to news media and County employees. An Annual Report captures and reviews county activities each year.

The Lane County budget process is open to the public through meetings, hearings, webcasts and a citizen-commissioner committee. The Budget team has received the Government Finance Officers Association of the United States and Canada (GFOA) Distinguished Budget Presentation Award. Says GFOA, "It reflects the commitment of the governing body and staff to meeting the highest principles of governmental budgeting." Lane County's budget functions as a policy document, financial plan, operations guide and communications piece for citizens.



## LANE COUNTY'S STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES



1. Ensure the continuity of high quality Lane County services by enhancing revenues and containing costs
2. Engage and inform citizens about Lane County Government services

**N**eed More Info?

Go to [www.lanecounty.org](http://www.lanecounty.org)