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Ted Wheeler's State of the County speech: The economic crisis sharpened priorities

By **Nikole Hannah-Jones, The Oregonian**

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Multnomah County used the economic crisis of the past year to sharpen its priorities and show what good government can do in tough times, Chairman Ted Wheeler said in his annual State of the County speech Friday.

The county's top official, who is running for re-election, spent most of his 35-minute speech before the City Club of Portland focusing on the **county's successes during the past year** despite one of the biggest budget shortfalls in recent memory.

Wheeler spoke of the county's efforts to stabilize its budget while pushing forward with innovative programs concerning domestic violence and mental illness, and progressing on long-stalled efforts such as a new east county courthouse and the Sellwood Bridge.

He also announced a few new initiatives, including a health and dental clinic to serve the poor in east county; a temporary pet adoption clinic in Portland to reduce euthanasia rates at the county animal shelter; and a task force to fight obesity.

"We could have let the economic crisis halt our progress, but we didn't. We could have used it as an excuse, but we didn't do that either," Wheeler said. "Instead we used it as an opportunity to act anew. Multnomah County continues to do great things despite our economic challenges and, as a result, we are stronger and better today."

Wheeler said the financial hardships allowed him to prioritize what is most important for the county: protecting vulnerable people and supporting children and families.

He spoke of his leadership on a mental health task force after the 2006 death of James Chasse in police custody and how that work will soon lead to the opening of a crisis assessment and treatment center. He talked about how poverty has shifted from Portland's urban core to east county, particularly the Rockwood neighborhood, and how the county must react by sending services where the people who need them live.

The county will open a health and dental clinic in Rockwood this summer in collaboration with Care Oregon, a nonprofit health provider, that will serve 3,000 low-income people by 2011.

Yet, even as the county moved forward with important projects, Wheeler said, it also worked to deal responsibly with a \$46 million budget gap and stabilize county finances.

Wheeler spread credit around, pointing to a county board with three new members that left the dysfunction of past boards behind and pressed forward with important initiatives such as a **county farm that supplied 13,000 pounds** of produce to the needy, an **emergency housing program for the homeless** and **work on human trafficking**. And he acknowledged **the county unions that voluntarily gave up raises** to save jobs and services.

The county paid down its debt, fully funded its reserves and closed the gaping budget hole in the most recent fiscal year. "We are working smarter with the resources we have available, are more cost-effective and are more accountable to you as taxpayers," Wheeler said.

He also sought to put to rest what he called the "perception of conflict" between himself and Sheriff Dan Staton, particularly after Wheeler announced he wants a measure put on the November ballot that would take the jails from the sheriff's office and put them under control of the Board of County Commissioners.

"I have respect for Sheriff Staton," Wheeler said. "There is no conflict between the two of us. We have an honest disagreement on the structure of the county jails."



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Ted Wheeler

A brief question-and-answer session included what else the county is doing concerning mental health services and to improve education. Wheeler addressed the question about what the county is going to do about the sagging downtown courthouse -- with a bit of humor.

"I'd like to acknowledge my staff," Wheeler said, as if closing out the session. As the laughter died down, he acknowledged that the downtown courthouse remains a problem because there's no money to fix it.

"This is a tough issue," he said. "The downtown courthouse is in terrible shape. It's a \$2 million project. The public would not support a bond today if we put it on the ballot."

-- **Nikole Hannah-Jones**

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