

SPEECH BY GOVERNOR VIC ATIYEH
SALEM CITY CLUB
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PREPARED TEXT

Oregon's prison system is living on borrowed time. And no city in the state sits closer to the powder keg than the City of Salem.

To understand where we are today — and how to move beyond it — you must understand the background. To understand it is to realize that our corrections system is reeling from more stress inside and outside the walls than at any time in the history of our state.

This crisis comes at a time when the resources of government to provide public services have been diminished by a faltering economy. Many governmental services have been impaired. Job vacancies in state government — including many here in Salem — have not been filled due to budget-cutting requirements. Although we see a turnaround beginning to occur, tough state fiscal problems remain.

We know what we must do.

These are times when state government must, above all, sort out its absolute priorities. It is my view as Governor that the most essential priority of government is to safeguard the people's lives and property. This is an absolute duty, which cannot be compromised.

Last August, I responded with a seven-point anti-crime program for legislative and administrative action by state government. I have taken the executive actions I proposed — and now my budget and legislative recommendations are before the Oregon Legislature.

Let me reiterate my seven-point program, then discuss at some length the element that concerns us most of all — the need for new prison space and the implications of not meeting that need.

First, I have called upon the 1983 Legislature to submit to the people a constitutional amendment reinstating capital punishment;

Second, I am supporting legislation introduced by the Attorney General which will, in effect, abolish the insanity plea in criminal cases;

Third, my budget has proposed additional anti-crime funding that will allow the Attorney General to better assist local prosecutors throughout Oregon;

Fourth, I have called on the Superintendent of Public Instruction to launch an educational program on crime in the public schools of Oregon — including special instructions on ways young people can avoid becoming the victims of crime;

Fifth, I have recommended that we double the current level of funding for the criminal investigation unit of the Oregon State Police;

Sixth, I have created by Executive Order a special Commission Against Violent Crime, made up of state and local officials involved in the criminal justice system, and chaired by the Attorney General of Oregon.

Seventh and finally, I have asked the Oregon Legislature for \$20 million for more prison space to house criminals who are a menace to society.

This last issue is one I want to dwell on today — and one that — in this package of recommendations — is critical to Salem.

If you have been following this issue, you may have noticed that the need for more prison space has been much in the news — both recently and for the last several years. You may remember the controversy surrounding the decision of a federal judge that Oregon's prison system was unconstitutionally overcrowded because of double-bunking in prison cells — a decision later overturned after time-consuming and expensive litigation. We all have taken note of the two prison bond measures submitted for a vote of the people in 1980 and 1982 — both of which went down to defeat.

All of these factors are but symptoms — symptoms of a problem that will not and has not gone away — symptoms of a problem that has, in fact, grown ever more worse and is now rapidly approaching a crisis point.

Consider these facts:

- Over a period of 20 years, Oregon's population has grown by over a million persons; the crime rate has spiraled, but no major adult prison has been built.
- Felony arrests over two decades have grown from a rate of 4,000 per year in 1960 to almost 40,000 in 1982.
- At the same time, prison bed capacity has risen from 1,713 to only 2,444 — an increase of barely more than 700 beds.
- The Legislature in the meantime — bowing to public pressure — has greatly increased the number of felony crimes in Oregon; while judges throughout the state are issuing and extending sentences by 50% or more.
- Prison population today is almost 1,000 inmates beyond design capacity.
- Violence — costly, destructive, and dangerous — is an ever-increasing possibility as convicts are jammed together and the ratio of prisoners to custodial personnel rises.
- 75% of those individuals convicted of crimes against persons (such as assault, homicide, murder, kidnapping, rape, abuse, robbery, and sodomy) are being placed inside prison walls.
- As a consequence, the proportion of violent offenders within the prison population has grown dramatically — it has become increasingly difficult to identify eligible inmates for parole or assignment to minimum security facilities.

Yet, we still have built no major new prison facility in 20 years.

It is not as if nothing has been done. In recent years we have taken every step possible to alleviate this situation:

- Courts have been using probation as the first disposition of 80% of all felony convictions — resulting in a 160% increase in probationers since 1975.
- The matrix used by the parole board in determining inmate release dates has been revised three times to try to reconcile the need to relieve overcrowding with the need to make certain that violent offenders are kept within walls.
- All available expedients have been put to use, including double-bunking in cells, early parole, and remodeling common use space (such as day rooms and work areas) to provide more bedspace.
- We have expanded as far as possible our non-residential work-release program, and our minimum security facilities at the Farm Annex, the Tillamook Forest Camp, and the Release Center in Salem.
- We have inaugurated major programs that emphasize rehabilitation in the community, promoted through our Juvenile Services Commission and our Community Corrections program.

But the fact of the matter is: We are now at the end of our tether. During the calendar year 1982, Oregon's prison population grew by 17%, the second highest rate of increase in the nation. Our state correctional services are being overwhelmed by sheer numbers.

At best, in recent years we have barely been able to keep abreast of the rate of increase in our prison population. Virtually everything that can be done to stretch our resources short of building a new facility has been done. We are fast approaching a crisis point.

Yet, despite all this ... despite irrefutable evidence confirming our desperate need for more bedspace ... some legislators have identified the \$20 million I have requested for prisons and my anti-crime program as "easy money to cut."

I say, easy for whom?

- Certainly not for our law enforcement and judicial systems which are rapidly being hamstrung by an escalating crime rate and a shortage of choices within the system to deal with convicted criminals.
- Certainly not for our corrections system, where staff reductions and increases in violent inmate populations have raised the ratio of prisoners to custodial personnel and raised the potential for violence to unprecedented levels.

- And certainly not for the citizens of Oregon — as few communities know better than Salem.

Why should Salem care? Because Salem has an important stake in the outcome of this issue:

- Over the years, Salem has received a disproportionate share of state correctional facilities and prisoner populations — a share far greater than its modest contribution of inmates to the system. In fact, if every community of the state used prisons at the rate they are used by Salem and Marion County, the need for additional bedspace would not exist.
- Salem's unusual share of the prison population has caused the gravitation of many prisoner families to Salem. An unusually large number of parolees are released in the Salem area, and choose to remain here — putting pressure on law enforcement, citizens, and social service providers.
- Another immediate factor important to Salem is the possible loss through legislative inaction of the first plan in many years that would relieve some of this pressure: studies made by the state for a new prison facility at this point will not recommend locating a new facility in Salem. Though no final decision has yet been made, the two suggested Salem-area sites (Prigg Cottage and Hillcrest if available) have both been rejected by DHR planners. That means that any new state correctional facility will likely be located outside Marion County and may, for the first time, begin to take some of the corrections pressure off the City of Salem.

For the present, however, the bottom line is in the numbers. Our state correctional services are being overwhelmed.

On January 1st of this year, our correctional institutions held 894 inmates beyond their design capacity. On June 30, 1985 we project that our institutions will be carrying 1,176 inmates beyond their design capacity.

Clearly, something must give. The situation has reached a crisis point where the alternatives are "build or release": either we provide more space or we must open wide the prison gates. The only remaining alternative is to let the powder keg explode — which is exactly what will happen if legislative inaction prevails.

For all of these reasons, I urge you to join me in doing everything possible to keep this issue before the Legislature — to keep the pressure on. The need for more prison beds in an additional adult facility is paramount and irrefutable. It is vital for Salem — and the state as a whole — to continue to seek the Legislature's attention, and push hard for action on this issue through positive action on my recommendations.

Thank you very much.

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