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## **Oregon needs to get ready**

By Greg Macpherson

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Preparing for natural disasters is a tough sell in politics. No official ever won re-election by getting ready for the calamity that didn't happen.

As state representative for Lake Oswego and nearby areas, I must admit I was skeptical when I was appointed last year to the Legislature's Joint Committee on Emergency Preparedness. The committee was formed for the interim before the 2007 legislative session to study Oregon's readiness for disasters.

Despite this initial reaction, I have found the information presented to the committee intriguing, with challenging policy implications. While most emergency responses are local, the state government should prepare for large-scale events.

Experts have told our committee that earthquakes pose the highest risk of widespread destruction to this region. While earthquake fault lines run throughout the region, one of them presents the greatest danger – the "Cascadia subduction zone" running north-south off the Pacific coast where two of the earth's plates meet.

Geologists have evidence that this fault line has seen magnitude 8 to 9 earthquakes a number of times over the past 10,000 years. Such an earthquake is hugely powerful, with many times the destructive force of the quakes felt in Oregon in recent years.

A magnitude 8-9 earthquake on the fault line off the Oregon coast would cause beaches to move up or down by several feet. A towering tsunami would inundate low-lying coastal communities. Highway 101 would be washed away in many places. Tall buildings and bridges in the Willamette Valley would collapse.

Earthquakes of that magnitude have occurred on the fault line at intervals from 200 to 1,000 years, with the average gap about 500 years. The last one took place on Jan. 26, 1700.

No matter what preparations are made, a magnitude 8-9 earthquake would cause tremendous destruction. But a number of actions we could take now would reduce the impact.

Banning new construction in the inundation zone along the coast would place fewer Oregonians at risk. Tsunami warning systems and improved evacuation routes would help coastal residents and visitors get out of harm's way. Requiring seismic retrofitting of buildings throughout the state, particularly older masonry structures, would keep more of them standing.

Our committee saw a fine example of preparation for coordinated disaster response last week in Pendleton. The

federal government has funded a command center there, near the Umatilla chemical weapons depot, to be ready for any accidental releases of poison gas.

But our committee also sees hard choices. Limiting construction in low-lying coastal areas would deprive owners of the fullest use of their property. Retrofitting older structures is expensive. Maintaining a well-equipped and highly skilled staff to coordinate the response to a possible disaster takes resources away from other important services. In the end, the question is how much to invest in preparation for a disaster that may not happen within our lifetimes. It's sobering to realize that Oregonians expect their government to keep them safe and will hold elected officials accountable if those preparations prove inadequate.

I would like to hear from local residents about this or any other legislative issue. I can be reached by regular mail at 322 Second St., Lake Oswego, Ore., 97034 or by e-mail at rep.gregmacpherson@state.or.us.

Rep. Greg Macpherson, Lake Oswego, represents Oregon House District 38.

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