

# Merkley, panel discuss economy

By **Kathy Fuller**  
*The Argus*

FOREST GROVE — Poverty is often hidden in the shadows of an economically successful county like Washington County.

Despite being known as the “economic engine” of the state and the fastest-growing county in Oregon according to the 2010 census, Washington County’s poverty rate is growing at an alarming rate.

That was the basis of “Life in Our Recession,” a panel discussion Sunday at Pacific University that included Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley and five panelists from local human rights,

health care and social service organizations.

“We’re in a powerful economic storm,” Merkley told the audience. “There is a lot of too little before us right now,” he said, “too little food in the pantry, retirement savings, home equity and too few jobs.”

Panelist Jerralynn Ness, Executive Director of Community Action, sees those with “too little” every day. Her organization provides emergency rent assistance to those in the most

dire of circumstances.

“When the recession hit, our phone lines collapsed,” she said. Last year

See **Panel** on A5



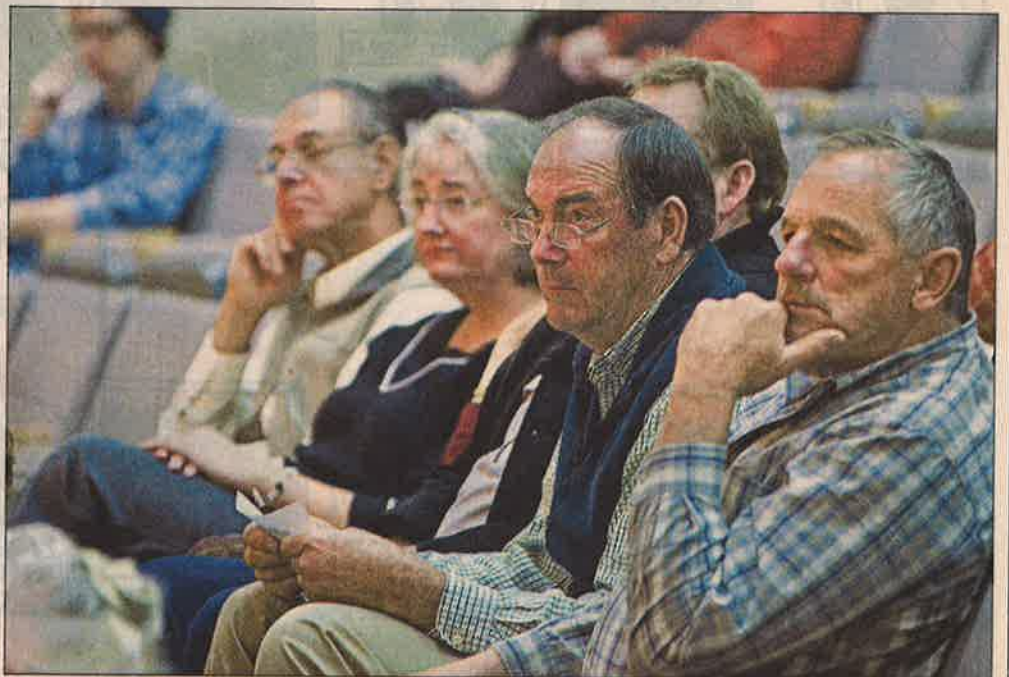
Michal Thompson / The Argus  
**Senator Jeff Merkley outlines his views on a wide range of current issues discussed in a town hall meeting Sunday at Pacific University.**





**Jerralyn Ness (above, far left), executive director of Washington County Community Action, introduces herself as one of five panelists staffing a town hall meeting Sunday on the Pacific University campus. A small, but attentive audience attended, adding their own questions for Senator Jeff Merkley.**

Michal Thompson / The Argus



## Panel

*From A1*

Community Action received 324,000 calls for emergency rent assistance.

While the county grew by 20 percent in the last 10 years, she said, poverty grew by 66 percent during the same time.

Dick Stenson, CEO of Tuality Healthcare, says the way forward for his organization is to stay true to core

values. Tuality will focus on "well health and social services" that promotes wellness to keep patients out of more costly health care.

Panelist Emily Gottfried with the Human Rights Council of Washington County is concerned with the country's immigration system, which she says fails to create "a meaningful pathway to citizenship." Merkley agreed, saying that

federal laws have created a "shadow second-class community unable to participate in society."

He said as a senator that he would "keep pushing" for a system of law that "ends the demeaning structure we have today."

His promise to the audience and the panel was to continue work in Washington, D.C., to end predatory mortgage practices, keep

education affordable, create a strong safety net for those in need and make it possible for middle class families to earn a fair living wage.

Pacific University professor Alfonso Lopez-Vasquez and professor emeritus Russ Dondero also sat on the panel.

*Kathy Fuller is a news reporter for the Hillsboro Argus. She can be reached at [kfuller@hillsboroargus.com](mailto:kfuller@hillsboroargus.com).*