

## **Road \$\$\$ won't be going to Sheriff's Office - yet**

Front Page News

By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

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Photo. Margaret Goodwin

The Josephine County Board of Commissioners revised the county budget on Wednesday, but not before there was an unsuccessful push to infuse the Sheriffs' Office with \$1 million in federal road money.

For the second year in a row, county Budget Committee member Margaret Goodwin suggested that money received last June from the federal government be spent on rural patrols, but she was voted down 5-1 by the rest of the committee.

All three county commissioners, who also sit on the committee, then voted 3-0 on a supplemental budget that did not include Goodwin's suggestion. The budget needed updating to reflect revenue received since the current budget was adopted last spring.

"Many people in this community believe we are in a public safety emergency," Goodwin said during a special committee meeting held Wednesday at the Anne Basker Auditorium. "If we have an emergency, a real emergency, we would be allocating every available resource to deal with it."

Goodwin's comments followed a recent suggestion by county Commissioner Cheryl Walker that the county seek state aid to deal with a public safety fiscal emergency. Budget reductions in 2012 have cut deeply into Sheriff's Office patrols, investigations and jail operations, with the department at a staffing level nearly half of what it was four years ago. The county's juvenile detention and shelter facility also closed.

The money that Goodwin wanted to use was received last June from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, as a result of congressional reauthorization of the Secure Rural Schools Act. The legislation stipulates the money is to be used for roads, but state law permits it to also be used for sheriff's patrols.

Goodwin was unsuccessful in a similar proposal she made last spring, when the money was expected, but not yet in hand. Several community members at the meeting criticized the Board of Commissioners for not agreeing with Goodwin.

Former Commissioner Sandi Cassanelli, who is seeking election to the board in the May primary, told board members they were choosing roads over deputies.

"It's a fictitious crisis you are making," Cassanelli said. "Shame on you."

However, Bill Ertel, also a commissioner candidate, praised the committee, saying the subject could soon be revisited.

"I applaud the committee for not being scared or hijacked," he said.

County Commissioner Simon Hare said he expected the subject to be taken up again when the Budget Committee begins meeting in two weeks to review the county budget for the fiscal year beginning July 1.

"It's appropriate during a budget committee hearing," Hare said. "You need to do that cost-benefit analysis."

The \$1 million has, for now, been placed in the county's public works road reserve fund, which stands at about \$2 million. County Finance Director Arthur O'Hare said after the meeting that he would prefer the fund to be \$3 million to \$4 million, to cover road or bridge emergencies.

"When you look at the liability of a major event, a major flood or something where we have a catastrophic event, this money would be required in order to fix our infrastructure," he said.

With an adequate reserve in place, the county would not need to borrow money in an emergency. Also, having a road reserve and general fund reserve means the county has a higher financial rating, which could affect interest rates should the county ever need to borrow.

"If our reserves were down and our ratings were down, it would cost us more money," he said.

For 15 years, the federal Secure Rural Schools Act and its reauthorizations have meant about \$1 million a year for county roads and bridges, according to O'Hare.

Earlier this month, U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., and several colleagues asked the House Appropriations Committee to extend the subsidy for the federal fiscal year beginning in October. No action had been taken on that request as of Wednesday.

If the road reserve was depleted, O'Hare said, it's possible it could be rebuilt by cutting back on roads projects. However, the county already is 15 percent behind from where it should be with its chip-sealing road resurfacing program, he said.

Since 2005, the number of county public works positions has declined from 67 to 51.

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