

## **Local funding request to boost rural patrols turned down**

By Melissa McRobbie of the Daily Courier

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Photo. MARIE HILL and GIL GILBERTSON

The Josephine County Budget Committee on Thursday turned down a request from Sheriff Gil Gilbertson for \$655,000 in Public Works money to increase rural patrols. The money would have funded four extra patrol deputies and two support employees to perform dispatch and records functions.

"I'm really conflicted about this," committee member Marie Hill said before voting "no" on a scaled-back version of the request. Others who voted no were committee member Jim Brumbach and county Commissioners Simon Hare and Cheryl Walker. All three county commissioners are automatic members of the Budget Committee.

For those who voted against the proposal, concerns included that the money transfer would be only a temporary fix; that the positions would be for just one year and therefore not worth the training time and expense; and the move would amount to "robbing Peter to pay Paul" and cause a drain on the Public Works Department.

"I think it's time for us to begin taking the medicine," Brumbach said. "I think we need to let this thing play out and let the constituents of this county see how things play out."

Before voting, the six-member committee, which, in addition to the commissioners includes three members of the public, had a lengthy discussion and heard from several speakers, including Grants Pass City Councilor Mark Gatlin, who is in a runoff race with Hare for a seat on the Board of Commissioners.

"I would like to voice my strong support for the sheriff's request," Gatlin said. "Our safety depends on presence."

He said there has been a notable drop in crime in downtown Grants Pass since police increased their presence in that area earlier this year, and said the same would be true in rural areas.

Gatlin pointed out that Grants Pass is not renewing its one-year contract with the county to rent as many as 30 jail beds at a cost of up to \$1 million a year — an agreement that expires at the end of June — and said the city doesn't have the money to continue to pay for those beds. The Sheriff's Office will have to lay off six employees once the contract with Grants Pass expires, Gilbertson said.

Amanda Main, one of two dispatchers at the Sheriff's Office, told the committee that the sheriff's staff is working tirelessly and that the two patrol deputies "just go from call to call ... It's very disheartening when we have to tell people over and over and over, 'No one will be responding.'"

The two patrol deputies currently work eight-hour shifts, five days a week. The Oregon State Police has been responding to the most urgent after-hours calls.

Measure 17-59, a proposed levy that would have increased capacity at the county jail and funded the reopening of the Juvenile Justice Center, was rejected by voters in Tuesday's primary election. Its passage would have freed up about \$2 million in general fund money, most of which would have gone toward rural patrols. In making his case on Thursday, Gilbertson said, "The public needs to know that we're not just picking up our marbles and closing our doors."

The funding reallocation Gilbertson was seeking is allowed under House Bill 4175, a state law approved in 2012. The law permits a handful of counties, including Josephine, to transfer federal forest road money for rural patrols. However, after 2016, the transfers could take place only on a loan basis and would have to be repaid.

The Budget Committee made a similar transfer in May 2012 after the failure of a previous public safety levy. It transferred \$425,000 from Public Works to the Sheriff's Office, enabling Gilbertson to keep three patrol deputies on the road. In creating its 2014-15 budget, the county initially set aside \$141,000 to begin paying back the Public Works Department, but the Budget Committee on Thursday voted to postpone repayment. Currently, there is no legal requirement for that money to be repaid to Public Works.

The committee discussed giving the sheriff \$514,000 in Public Works money, plus the \$141,000 it had initially planned to pay back to Public Works, but only Commissioner Keith Heck and committee member Pat Fahey supported that proposal. Hare opposed the idea in part because it would bring the Sheriff's Office debt to Public Works to nearly \$1 million.

Hill said one of her concerns about giving Gilbertson the money was how it would look to voters. She said she could see them saying, "We knew they had the money, they just moved it from somewhere else."

Several board members noted that as bad as things are now, the day of reckoning will be July 1, 2015, when the county is poised to go "over a cliff" financially. Rosemary Padgett, the county's chief financial officer, noted that the \$4.8 million the county received as the result of a temporary extension of the federal county payments program will be gone next year and no funding source has been identified to replace it. "Next year, it appears, is the year the wheels fall off the cart," Fahey said.

Fahey volunteers with the group Citizens Securing Our Safety, which placed Measure 17-59 on the ballot and is exploring various other funding mechanisms to fund county services, including a proposal to divert state lottery money to counties and the possibility of developing a local industry focused on tellurium mining.

Reach reporter Melissa McRobbie at 541-474-3721 or [mmcrobbe@thedailycourier.com](mailto:mmcrobbe@thedailycourier.com)