

Glaring Fiscal Woes for Josephine County

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Josephine County could look and feel a lot different by summer.

There may be no deputies to respond to calls for help in rural areas. Food, nutrition counseling and access to health services may no longer be available to low-income mothers and their babies. Couples wanting to tie the knot at the courthouse may have to wait because of reduced hours of operations in the Clerk's Office.

Budget Committee Chairman Pat Fahey said, "The best way to solve a problem is to acknowledge a problem."

Josephine County has plenty of problems.

The failure of Measure 17.49, a three-year tax that would have generated about \$9.1 million annually for the criminal justice system, will have far-reaching effects on county government operations and the services it provides. Tuesday, voters rejected the measure by only 539 votes, leaving the county with \$3.965 million for public safety operations in fiscal year 2013-14, down from about \$12 million just two years ago.

The Budget Committee is set to meet again Tuesday at 3 p.m. in Anne Basker Auditorium, 604 N.W. Sixth St., to tackle the county's fiscal problems. This will be the second time it's met since Measure 17.49 was rejected.

Commissioner and Budget Committee member Simon Hare said, "We have to make a determination about how we are going to spend the reserves we do have."

County finance officials anticipate a decrease of approximately 30 percent of public safety programs in the criminal justice system beginning July 1. To balance the budget, which is required by state law, officials anticipate 15.74 full-time equivalent positions will have to be cut. Of those, 4.85 will come from the Sheriff's and District Attorney's offices and the Juvenile Justice Department.

Before the election, the Public Health Department and the Sheriff's and District Attorney's offices asked the Budget Committee for additional money. Public Health requested \$135,000 for clinic operations, \$36,000 for the Women, Infants and Children program and \$14,000 for Animal Protection services. The District Attorneys Office asked for at least \$275,000, and the Sheriff's Office wanted about \$649,700 to pay for patrols, jail operations and court security.

Hare said instead of looking to increase department funding, the committee should get ready to slash expenses. He said he's been "preparing for doomsday" and compiled a list of potential cuts that include:

- Closing Anne Basker Auditorium and holding weekly business sessions and other meetings in the commissioners' conference room, at a savings of about \$25,000 a year.
- Closing the Josephine County Building at 102 S. Redwood Highway in Cave Junction, at a savings of about \$14,000 a year.
- Sell all nonessential county vehicles.
- Discontinue any general fund support to offices outside the criminal justice system.
- Cut support staff in the commissioners', county legal counsel and other offices.
- In June, when Chief Financial Officer Rosemary Padgett's contract comes up, extend it for only six months.
- Petition the state to pay the \$68,000 it costs to provide court security.
- Ask public officials to take a 10 percent pay cut.
- Reduce operating hours in offices.
- Eliminate the WIC program.

Hare said even if all his suggested cuts were imposed, it would yield only about \$350,000 — only a little more than half of what the Sheriff's Office needs to maintain services at their current level.

Sheriff Gil Gilbertson said "if we are not able to shore up the funding to remain status quo, we will have to begin our ramp-down process, rather than wait for the last minute changes. Our jail beds will be reduced to 60 (from 99), shifts at the jail will change to two 12-hour shifts, and our patrol and court security will be reduced. We have union guidelines we must comply with, so the sooner we know what changes are necessary, the better for all concerned."

Last year, about 90 patrol deputies, jail corrections officers, prosecutors and juvenile shelter/detention workers were laid off following cuts in federal subsidies and failure of a previous tax measure.

Gilbertson said, with the money he has, his office can afford only one patrol deputy. His office has three contract deputies, but they can be used only for particular purposes.

Commissioner Cheryl Walker said that won't do. It is customary to have at least two deputies respond to "emergencies in progress," so officers have backup in case something goes awry.

"The risk is too high ... I'd rather we not have a service than put anybody's life at risk," Walker said.

Walker said many of the county's expenses come from state-mandated services. She suggests billing the state for those services. She doesn't think the state will write the county a check, but it could prompt the Legislature to examine the situation.

Jeff Wolf, member of political action committee Replacing Essential Services Today Required by Everyone, is worried about the future.

"I think the experience of the last year has shown through," he said. "People did not believe what we said would happen. It's scary. It's going to get worse."

In Grants Pass and rural Josephine County, burglary reports were up about 50 percent in 2012 versus the previous year. In Grants Pass, assaults were up more than 30 percent and thefts were up more than 25 percent compared to 2011.

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