

Voters reject public safety measures

By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

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Photo. Kevin Launius/Daily Courier

Steven Campbell, left, talks with Josephine County Sheriff Gill Gilbertson Tuesday night.

Law enforcement measures on the ballot Tuesday failed in Josephine County and Grants Pass, with almost all votes counted as of Wednesday at 8:30 a.m.

The county measures would have funded rural sheriff's patrols and the county jail, while the city measure would have paid for both police and fire operations.

The county measures vote was roughly 3-2 against, while the city measure was nearly 50-50, with no votes carrying the day - so far.

Only 154 votes separated yes from no in the city, and about 1,000 to 1,200 ballots from around the county remained to be counted by hand, with results due Wednesday afternoon, Josephine County Clerk Art Harvey said.

Failure of the county measures helps ensure rural patrols will be on the road only 12 hours a day, and the county jail will house only 100 inmates, out of 262 jail beds available.

Sheriff Gil Gilbertson said he would expect layoffs to begin in July 2010, unless new funding is found.

"I'll have to present another proposal to the public," he said.

Federal funding called county payments has helped pay for sheriff's patrols and the jail, but that funding is scheduled to be phased out over the course of the next four years - a scenario Gilbertson has likened to a slow death.

Already, the number of Sheriff's Office employees has dropped to 78 - down from about 118 deputies eight years ago. Currently, 16 deputies work rural patrols - about half of previous levels - and the number of inmates held at the jail is about half of what the jail once held.

The measures on the ballot would have funded about 130 sheriff's employees.

"The public spoke," Gilbertson said. "We'll comply. We'll just plug ahead."

Two sheriff's measures were on the ballot: one to fund rural patrols and the other to pay for the county jail. Rural residents voted on the tax measure to fund rural patrols, while the county as a whole voted on the jail measure.

The rural patrol vote was 66-34 against, while the countywide jail vote was 60-40 against. Precinct-by-precinct votes won't be available for three weeks.

City voters apparently have turned down their own tax measure, to fund the Grants Pass Department of Public Safety, which has both police and fire divisions. It's up to the City Council to decide if a retooled request will be sent to voters, which is what happened the last time a city levy failed, seven years ago.

"It's frustrating to be so close," city Public Safety Director Joe Henner said Wednesday.

The city recently hired six firefighters to help staff two new voter-approved public safety stations south of the Rogue River. And, it planned to hire seven officers in the next four years, if the levy passed.

The levy would have raised about \$4.5 million a year, the equivalent of about 25 police officers and 25 firefighters, according to Henner, whose department employs about 100. The levy would supplement a permanent tax base used to fund public safety.