

Curry County considers options after voters reject public safety tax

By Jeff Barnard

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Voters in Curry County have rejected a \$3.2 million public safety tax increase that would have tripled local property taxes to restore law enforcement services cut as the federal government ends timber subsidies.

County Commission Chairman David Brock Smith said today he will call the governor's office to start discussions about whether an emergency declaration is needed to prop up county finances.

But neither Smith nor the two other county commissioners were ready to immediately seek an emergency declaration. They still have the options of tapping \$30 million in road funds, seeking another levy in May, or deciding that meeting the constitutionally mandated services of a jail and a sheriff are enough. [Nothing says that the jail has to be staffed nor deputies hired?].

A new state law gives the governor and county commissioners authority to jointly declare a public safety emergency **if voters refuse to support minimum services**. An emergency declaration allows commissioners to impose a surcharge on an existing tax to cover half the budget gap, and the state would pick up the rest.

Greg Wolf, regional solutions director in Gov. John Kitzhaber's office, said he had been emailing with county officials and expected to be talking to them by phone later in the day.

While voters turned down the countywide public safety levy, they endorsed a hospital bond in Gold Beach, and funding for city police in Port Orford, said state **Sen. Jeff Kruse, R-Roseburg**. A surprise \$1 million from Congress in a one-year extension of a timber county safety net may have convinced some voters the levy was unnecessary.

"To a large degree, it's how many times can you cry wolf," Kruse said. "They have put several measures on the ballot because if they didn't increase revenues, the world would come to an end, but so far it hasn't."

County Commission Vice Chairwoman Susan Brown said voters have rejected the last seven levies, and it was time to have a conversation about just what they want for public safety.

Sheriff John Bishop said declaring an emergency would just be a temporary measure, with a maximum duration of three years

Clyde Burke, a retired management consultant and member of the Brookings Harbor Tea Party, said raising taxes was not needed as long as the county can tap the road fund, which has more than \$30 million in it.

“That is a better solution than having to jump through all the hoops, frustration and agony of having the state bail out Curry County,” he said.

Funding for public safety at current levels runs out at the end of June.

The governor has not said what he would define as minimum services, and Wolf said any decision would rely heavily on the feelings of county commissioners.

If the county refused to pay for the district attorney’s office and parole and probation, the state would likely have to step in to provide them, Kruse added.

The \$3.2 million per year would have covered the jail, sheriff’s patrols, prosecutors, parole and probation, and juvenile services, and served as a bridge until revenues start to come in from an increase in logging on federal forests in Western Oregon — legislation that has yet to be enacted.

Kruse said it would only cost \$350,000 to cover the constitutionally mandated minimum services of a jail and a sheriff.

Public safety levies also failed in the Mid-Wilamette Valley’s Polk County in northwest Oregon’s Columbia County.