

## **May 17, 2015. Jeff Duewel. RCC Students Explore Levy-related Sociology Concepts.**

Jeff Duewel of the Daily Courier

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The 35 students in Henry Wisniewski's introductory sociology class at Rogue Community College got their hands dirty with crime data, interviews, surveys and research this term. They wrestled with two topics on everyone's minds — taxes and crime, in light of Tuesday's election.

They talked to police Chief Bill Landis, Sheriff Dave Daniel, and Assessor Connie Roach, among others. They sifted through statistics on crime and drugs, and asked people questions.

"I like to have students do stuff that's hands on," said Wisniewski, in his fifth year as an instructor at RCC. "It's important to challenge students — get them to look at what's happening in society."

What did they find?

They learned that Josephine County is among the poorest counties in the state, and it has a drug problem. Their own surveys told them most people felt safe, and that most surveyed didn't think crime would decline if taxes went up.

"I don't feel like a lot of people are informed. We're just told we need taxes to be safe," said student Kristina Shone, who surveyed about 60 fellow students in two classes.

Many voters have already decided whether another \$1.40 per \$1,000 in assessed property value would improve public safety, with two days left to vote. The tax would be added to the 58 cents per \$1,000 now collected for county government services, the lowest such permanent rate for county government in the state.

The money would add sheriff's patrols, increase capacity at the jail, and reopen the juvenile detention unit and shelter at the Juvenile Justice Center.

Some in the class took issue with the presentation of 58 cents per \$1,000 as the lowest permanent rate in the state. When you add taxes for fire districts, school districts, city services and 4-H/Extension services, the overall property tax rate is certainly higher, and varies significantly, depending on where you live.

The actual property tax for county services alone is currently 82 cents per \$1,000 — 58 cents permanent, 15.8 cents for the voter-approved jail bond from more than a decade ago, and 8 cents for three years for an Animal Control levy, approved just last year.

Josephine County's overall average property tax rate of \$9.48 per \$1,000 in assessed value — based on the Oregon Department of Revenue's latest data from 2012-13 — is actually the second-lowest in the state. Curry County's is the lowest at \$8.68.

But average rates hardly tell the whole story — tax rates vary widely within the county. Grants Pass residents pay \$6.32 per \$1,000 for city services and \$4.52 per \$1,000 for School District 7 services, out of their total of \$12.58 per \$1,000, or \$2,516 for a house assessed at \$200,000.

Those in the county — outside of Cave Junction and not in any public fire district, have the lowest rate at \$6.01 per \$1,000, or \$1,202 on a \$200,000-assessed property. Many of them do pay a private company, Rural/Metro Fire Department, for fire protection.

Students found crime statistics even more difficult to decipher.

Student Ben Musser found some good apples-to-apples statistics, when comparing Josephine County to Benton County (county seat, Corvallis). He found virtually the same number of crimes (7,378 to 7,471, respectively) for almost the same number of people (82,775 to 86,785, respectively), in the most recent state statistics.

He also found that crimes against people are gradually declining nationwide. But property crimes in Josephine County were 85 percent higher than the national average. That turned Musser from a no to a yes vote on the public safety ballot.

He was the exception. Randy Humphrey said, based on information gathered by the class, that he went from "on the fence" to a no vote. Josh Sharpe, who owns property in the county, said he was originally for the levy and now is against it, based on a "lack of a comprehensive plan for the future." In other class findings:

- The students, curious about potentially frivolous spending, found that a SWAT vehicle used by the Grants Pass Department of Public Safety was essentially donated from a grant.
- Sharpe's research indicated that 22.6 percent of Josephine County households made less than \$15,000 a year, and that the poverty level here is 21.9 percent, compared to 16 percent for the entire state.
- Damon Howard was told by two insurance agents that rates haven't gone up for renters or property owners because of lack of public safety, and the agents don't believe they will.
- A handful of senior citizens were surveyed, and they opposed the levy by a 2 to 1 margin. One described living in the middle of nowhere and said it didn't matter if there were deputies or not.

"Why should I pay more taxes for them to continue to ignore us," was the response.

Another wrote "It's such a small increase, I can't believe it hasn't already passed. Are people so greedy they would prefer break-ins and junkies becoming the norm?"

Wisniewski said the goal was to exercise everyone's brains. "We're not going to change people's minds anyway," he said.