

## **Local forum focus: public safety**

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### Photo - Officials Discuss Levy Options, **Shaun Hall/Daily Courier**

Grants Pass Public Safety Director Bill Landis addresses a crowd of about 75 people Tuesday at the Anne Basker Auditorium during an event billed as the "State of Public Safety in Josephine County." From left are city Finance Director Jay Meredith, Club Northwest owner Scott Draper, Landis, Concierge Home & Business Watch co-owner Julie Thomas, Josephine County Juvenile Justice Director Jim Goodwin and Josephine County Sheriff Dave Daniel.

Dozens of people turned out at the Anne Basker Auditorium in Grants Pass on Tuesday evening to hear a panel of public safety leaders and others discuss Josephine County's law enforcement crisis and a May ballot measure that proponents hope will bring some relief.

"We need the criminal justice system to step in when deterrence is not enough ... There have to be consequences," said Julie Thomas, co-founder of the private security company Concierge Home & Business Watch. Concierge has been filling some of the gaps in police coverage in the cash-strapped county, where budget cuts in 2012 forced the layoffs of two-thirds of the sheriff's staff, the closure of the Juvenile Justice Center and cutbacks in the District Attorney's Office.

Thomas was speaking on a panel organized by the citizens' group Community United For Safety, or CUFS. The event was the first of three public forums planned around the county to discuss a public safety levy the group hopes to place on the May ballot.

The measure calls for a five-year

property tax of \$1.40 per \$1,000 of assessed value, or \$210 annually for a \$150,000 property. The money would pay for more sheriff's deputies, increased capacity at the jail, and the reopening of the Juvenile Justice Center.

Josephine County voters have shot down three straight property tax proposals to fund public safety since 2012. Organizers of the current campaign arrived at the \$1.40 figure — more than the \$1.19 sought last May — after having a professional poll done to determine what residents are willing to pay, and for which services.

This time around, the proposal also calls for the formation of a citizens' oversight committee and an annual audit to ensure that funds collected are being spent properly. By addressing a persistent distrust of government on the part of some county residents, and by tailoring the measure to what people want most — especially more patrols — proponents are hoping this time will be the charm.

Thomas said that since Concierge was founded in 2009, the law enforcement "gap" in the county has grown into a "gaping hole." Last year, she said, Concierge handled 2,000 calls for service.

"The bad guys know that there's no teeth. There's no teeth with us, there's no teeth if police show up," she said.

As a result, she said, things are more dangerous for her employees because it's easier to find themselves in perilous situations with little or no backup.

"They need the police to back them up because right now they're backing each other up," Thomas said.

Oregon State Police have also been picking up the slack in rural areas of the county where there are no sheriff's patrols after hours. Because of a one-time infusion of reserve money approved by county commissioners over the summer, there are now six patrol deputies and seven-day-a-week coverage by the Sheriff's Office — but still no overnight coverage.

In several cases in recent months, OSP troopers have arrested people only to have them turned away at the understaffed county jail. The jail is operated by the Sheriff's Office, which decides whom to book and release based on available bed space and a list of priority crimes.

New Sheriff Dave Daniel, the Grants Pass police officer who defeated two-term Sheriff Gil Gilbertson in November, says he doesn't want to release any criminals.

"I want everybody that's arrested to go to jail," he said.

He also wants to have resident deputies in various areas of the county and have the Sheriff's Office contract out for dispatch services.

Daniel, who has been in office a little over two weeks, is still looking for ways to achieve these goals, and has been meeting with his counterparts in other law enforcement agencies.

He isn't counting on the county getting much more in federal payments.

"I really don't think the federal government is going to do anything for us anymore," Daniel said.

It can be politically tricky in Josephine County — home to the lowest permanent tax rate in the state — for an elected official to openly support a levy proposal. Daniel spoke in general terms about his department's need for more funding.

"I can do my job without your help, but I need your help to do my job right," he said.

Juvenile Justice Director Jim Goodwin's department also stands to benefit if the levy is approved. The Juvenile Justice Center contains a 16-bed shelter and a 14-bed detention facility that are both sitting empty because the department can't afford to staff them. Criminal suspects under 18 are

lodged at Jackson County's detention center, where Josephine County rents three beds. Youths who need a shelter bed because of an unstable home situation, including abusive situations, have nowhere to go, Goodwin added.

Rural/Metro Fire District Chief Austin Prince said it should also be noted that a thin police presence also affects firefighters and medical responders, whose safety is compromised when there aren't enough police to respond quickly to crimes or crashes that involve injuries.

Also on the panel was Club Northwest owner Scott Draper, who is one of the people spearheading the levy campaign. He decided to get involved after customers began canceling their memberships because they were moving away. During "exit interviews," the customers mentioned the lack of public safety services as a factor in their decision to leave.

"It has affected my business already," he said.

After each panelist spoke, moderator Jay Meredith, who works as finance director for the city of Grants Pass, read some questions written by audience members on index cards. One question was for Grants Pass Public Safety Director Bill Landis: If the ballot measure passes, will the city continue to charge residents a utility fee to fund its contract to rent jail beds from the county?

Landis said he doesn't want to speak for the City Council, but that the answer would likely be "no."

"The sheriff has said he would be able to lodge those same offenders, and therefore the utility tax would not be necessary," Landis said.

Another audience member wanted to know how the oversight committee for the levy would work, and who would be on it. Draper said there is a group of people working to create bylaws for the committee and a selection process. The committee will include 10 to 15 people from all walks of life, who will represent various geographical areas of the county, he said.

Despite strong feelings throughout the county about any new tax proposal, the forum went smoothly with little interruption, although there were a couple of grumbles in the crowd about the question-and-answer format, which didn't allow speakers to directly address the panelists. Prior to the meeting, an opponent of the levy, Pam Hackett, was cited by police for trespassing after she brought a "No New Taxes" sign into the auditorium after being warned against it.

The two other forums will take place at 6 p.m. on Feb. 2 at Wild River Pizza in Cave Junction; and at 6:30 p.m. on Feb. 10 at North Valley High School in Merlin.

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