

## **Hare doesn't think new taxes, fees needed to match state aid**

Front Page News

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By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

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Photo CHERRYL WALKER

Josephine County Commissioner Simon Hare hopes no new taxes or fees will be needed if the state steps in to shore up funding for county public safety services. Hare believes the county may have enough resources to provide a needed match to any aid the state might provide.

The state might act if commissioners ask Gov. Kate Brown to declare a public safety funding emergency in the county and invoke a measure approved by the 2013 Oregon Legislature to provide temporary aid to financially ailing counties.

It could mean millions of dollars for a "minimally adequate level of public safety services," under provisions of the law, usually referred to as House Bill 3453. But the law requires the county to match the level of state aid, and some citizens have told commissioners they fear taxes or fees would be raised to provide the match.

"I'm more interested in leveraging existing revenues," Hare said Thursday, after commissioners met in a work session to discuss the possibility of seeking the state aid. "We can probably meet that minimum level, if we are matched with what we currently have."

Hare qualified his prediction, saying much study is needed. A declaration could be months off.

"It's going to be a slow, diligent process," he vowed.

Commissioners are still in information-gathering mode. They expect to first ask local agencies and organizations their opinions on what they would consider to be minimum service levels.

Commissioner Cheryl Walker, who last week proposed seeking the state's help, also has been trying to gather historical statistics on crime, to document trends.

Commissioners plan to discuss the matter again Thursday, during a 9 a.m. work session at their offices.

Allaying fears of a state takeover of county services, Hare said there would be no takeover, but that there would be an intergovernmental agreement between the county and state on how the state aid would be spent, and that there would be state oversight of that spending.

"The county administers it," he said.

County Counsel Wally Hicks agreed, saying there would be "some oversight."

Hicks said an increase in property taxes would require a vote of the people, as required by the Oregon Constitution. He also calmed fears that 911 system user fees would be raised, saying such fees may only be used for the 911 system.

Hicks also pointed out that an emergency declaration would allow only 18 months of aid, unless the Legislature makes changes to the law.

Looking back, ahead

Josephine County's funding problems have been prompted in large part by declining federal payments to the county. The payments are tied to federal timber harvests that have dwindled in large part due to environmental protection laws. And voters have not approved higher taxes to make up the shortfall.

As a result, county budgets have been cut and layoffs hit hard four years ago, with more layoffs expected next year, if temporary federal subsidies known as Secure Rural Schools payments continue to fall or end altogether. The subsidies amounted to about \$4 million this year.

Already, county government employment has dropped by about 25 percent in the last four years: from just over 400 employees four years ago to just over 300 this year, according to Cheryl Walker, chairwoman of the Josephine County Board of Commissioners.

The Sheriff's Office, at 51 budgeted positions this year, is about half the size it was four years ago. And the county's 30-bed juvenile shelter-detention facility has closed.