

Emergency aid from the state? Forget about it

Front Page News

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By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

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Photo. SHAUN HALL/Daily Courier Oregon state Rep. Duane Stark, left, speaks Wednesday at a meeting of the Josephine County Local Public Safety Coordinating Council. Stark said he was confident Josephine County could solve its public safety problem on its own, without emergency state aid.

Three local lawmakers on Wednesday threw cold water on the hot topic of the day: a proposal to ask the state to bail out Josephine County's public safety services.

"Please don't waste your time," state Rep. Carl Wilson told local officials. "It is not a good plan."

Instead, he and state Rep. Duane Stark and state Sen. Herman Baertschiger Jr., all Grants Pass Republicans, urged county residents to solve their own problems.

"I do have more confidence in my community than our Legislature," Baertschiger said.

Stark chimed in, "Our community can do this. It really can."

The lawmakers spoke to members of the Local Public Safety Coordinating Council, which includes Sheriff Dave Daniel and Grants Pass police Chief Bill Landis, as well as other representatives from criminal justice, social services and local government organizations.

After their appearance, county Commissioner Keith Heck summed up what he just heard. "I refer to these things as reality therapy," he said. "It certainly undermines any effort to promote this any further."

Two weeks ago, the council voted unanimously to declare that a public safety "fiscal emergency" exists or is imminent in the county. The group acted after county Commissioner Cheryl Walker suggested that Gov. Kate Brown be asked to declare a fiscal emergency in the county.

Four years ago, budget cuts tied to dwindling federal funding resulted in deep cuts to rural patrols and forced the county jail to reduce the number of inmates held by nearly 25 percent. Also, the county's juvenile shelter and detention facility was closed.

Oregon State Police now usually respond when deputies are not on duty, mainly to calls involving threats to life and limb. Additional cuts of about 50 percent at the Sheriff's Office are expected next year if Congress does not renew federal subsidies. Meanwhile, county voters have repeatedly rejected any increase in property taxes.

The lawmakers were invited to air their thoughts on an untested 2013 state law known as House Bill 3453, which allows the state to give aid to a county in a public safety fiscal emergency. They spoke to about a dozen members of the Local Public Safety Coordinating Council, plus about 20 onlookers, during a meeting held at a county parole and probation facility in Grants Pass.

The law cannot be invoked without the cooperation of local lawmakers, something that is highly unlikely given their distaste for the bill itself. Stark said it was too vague.

"There's so many holes in this bill, so many issues," he said.

Instead, Stark suggested that hearings be held to gather public suggestions — suggestions coming in chunks of "500 words or less" — and then public hearings be held to dissect the ideas.

Baertschiger felt that implementation of the bill's provisions would give the state too much control over county affairs.

"You're giving the governor the power," he said. "I'd rather have my local officials running the county."

Wilson felt that the bill would allow Salem to dictate service and taxation levels.

"You would be telling this community what to do and how much to pay," Wilson said. "This community has to live by the will of the people. I have faith in the people of this community to do the right thing."