

## **'Status quo' budget proposed for coming year**

Front Page News

By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

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Photo. ARTHUR O'HARE

Josephine County Finance Director Arthur O'Hare has proposed a "status quo" budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1. O'Hare, giving his annual budget message on Tuesday, offered no major program changes, as directed by the county Board of Commissioners.

The county's total proposed budget is \$90 million, a 5 percent increase from the current budget, O'Hare said. That represents an increase of about \$4.5 million.

However, about 90 percent of the county budget is comprised of "pass through" money from the state and federal governments and is not under the control of local officials.

O'Hare took a glance back at cuts that have reduced services and also took a look into the future, predicting more service cuts if federal revenue to the county continues to decline.

The major increases in the budget include \$1.9 million in a pass-through transit grant; \$772,000 for public works projects; \$494,000 for transit bus replacements and a line stripper truck; and \$610,000 for Public Health, mainly due to payments for health care services and for increased Animal Control services made possible by a voter-approved tax levy in 2014.

The general fund is up about 5 percent too, with the Planning Department adding one position; Emergency Management now paying for building and operations expenses; and the assessor adding grant revenue and related expenses.

The county's juvenile department director and top prosecutor gave presentations Tuesday to the Budget Committee, which includes the Board of Commissioners and three citizen members.

Juvenile Justice Director Jim Goodwin said accused felons were sometimes cited and released, rather than held in detention, due to closure of the county's youth detention facility.

And District Attorney Ryan Mulkins said his department was able to prosecute all cases that come to his office, but only because there's so few deputies on the road he's not getting as many cases as he once did.

"Josephine County is able to maintain essential service in most programs, although at reduced levels," O'Hare said. "We are facing challenges, especially in public safety."

Part of that public safety system is the county's juvenile department, which handles court cases, probation and counseling services for youth. Goodwin said the three youth detention beds that the county rents in Douglas County were used to the max last year.

"We used that completely," he said. "There were some (youths) we weren't able to detain because of the limitation."

He proposed the county rent another bed.

It would cost about \$1 million to reopen Josephine County's shelter and detention facility, which was closed due to budget cuts four years ago. It can hold 14 youths in detention and 16 in its shelter.

The facility, in downtown Grants Pass, previously held an average of six to eight youths in detention, with that number often dropping to three or four during the week, and up to capacity on weekends.

"We were oftentimes full," Goodwin said. "You'd hit a weekend, we'd be full."

The shelter had a waiting list, he said. The expected opening of the nonprofit Hearts With a Mission youth shelter in northeast Grants Pass will help, he said.

In the last year, the county's juvenile department received nearly 300 referrals from law enforcement agencies, down from about 400 before budget cuts hit four years ago, according to Goodwin.

In the prosecutor's office, Mulkins said his staff was handling the workload, but that the department would need help if the Sheriff's Office had more patrols.

Deputies are on patrol about half time, with Oregon State Police responding to emergencies the rest of the time.

O'Hare said it was uncertain if Congress would reauthorize the Secure Rural Schools Act, which could help fund county services. The county received around \$4.3 million through the program for the fiscal year that begins on July 1. No money is in the pipeline beyond that unless Congress takes action.

"If not renewed by Congress, then we can anticipate a significant reduction in services in fiscal year 2017-18," O'Hare said.

The budgets for the Sheriff's Office and Public Works Department are expected to be discussed by the committee beginning at 4 p.m. Tuesday at the Anne Basker Auditorium, 400 N.W. Sixth St.

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