

Critics, supporters weigh in on public safety bailout issue

Front Page News

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By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

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Photo: Josephine County commissioner Simon Hare, right, speaks Wednesday as fellow Commissioners Cheryl Walker and Keith Heck listen, during a discussion about public safety funding.

For the second time in a week, people criticized the Josephine County Board of Commissioners for even thinking about asking the state for a public safety bailout.

This time, on Wednesday, while voices were raised and the audience murmured discontentedly at times, board Chairwoman Cheryl Walker had to admonish only one speaker for attacking another speaker's reputation, and Commissioner Simon Hare reminded the crowd to be polite while others have the floor.

"Were all adults here," Hare said.

Walker touched off the debate last week when she proposed the county seek to invoke a 2013 state law that allows the governor to declare a state of fiscal emergency for budget-strapped rural counties. Aid from the state could help the county deal with budget cuts that in recent years have slashed rural sheriff's patrols, closed the county juvenile shelter and detention facility and reduced capacity at the Josephine County Jail.

Critics had their say last week.

This week, some supporters of the proposal spoke up, too.

"Sometimes, you just have to bite the bullet and deal with what is, instead of what should be," said Elizabeth Hirni, supporting the board.

"When federal funding goes away, we the people must stand up," said Andrew Millerd, stating that a family member's home recently was burglarized and that he himself had to confront a trespasser.

"Things are not good," said David Smith, who believes many people are willing to pay higher taxes in order to get more law enforcement. "It's time for us to do something."

Rycke Brown observed that jail inmates were being released early due to budget cuts, and that crime is getting "weirder and weirder."

Archie Lidey, a Grants Pass police detective who leads a private, nonprofit group called Securing Our Safety, told the commissioners they should have invoked the fiscal emergency legislation already.

"To have community, it takes everybody to throw something into the stone soup pot," Lidey said.

The state's financial help, if it comes, likely would have to be matched by local contributions — thus the rub, with opponents fearing higher taxes and a state takeover.

"We don't need commissioners who would sell out our sovereignty," urged Sandi Cassanelli, who has filed as a candidate for a seat on the Board of Commissioners.

Another commission candidate, Bill Hunker, called any state help a temporary "bridge to nowhere." Legislation allowing the state's help sets an 18-month limit on aid.

Another candidate for the commission, Ray Smith, didn't believe there was a fiscal emergency, nor that one that was necessarily imminent. "I would hope you would oppose this soon and loudly," he told commissioners.

Commissioners were due to discuss the matter further in a work session today, with Hare suggesting that the Local Public Safety Coordinating Council be asked to provide data on local crime and render an opinion on whether to seek the state's help. Commissioner Keith Heck said he remains uncommitted on invoking the emergency legislation. Heck also spoke to the attacks against the board, saying Walker's proposal deserved study and that he didn't want to be faulted for asking questions about it.

"I like to ask questions," he said.

Nowadays, the Sheriff's Office is just over half its former size, with around 50 budgeted positions this year, compared with nearly 100 four years ago. The Juvenile Department is a third of what it was, with fewer than 10 employees, compared with nearly 30 before.

More layoffs might hit in the summer of 2017, when current reserves are drawn down. The budget cuts are linked to declining federal subsidies — unless it is renewed, the federal county payments program will provide around \$4.5 million for the fiscal year that runs from July 1, 2016, through June 30, 2017.