

Lawmakers to discuss public safety concerns at meeting

Front Page News

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By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

http://www.thedailycourier.com/articles/2016/03/29/front_page_news/news03.txt

Photo: Rep. Carl Wilson and Sen. Herman Baertschiger Jr.

Two state lawmakers representing Josephine County have raised questions about the availability of state aid to deal with a local public safety fiscal emergency, real or perceived.

Rep. Carl Wilson [elected January 2015] and Sen. Herman Baertschiger Jr. [Herman Baertschiger, Jr., is a Republican member of the Oregon Senate, representing the 2nd District. He was elected in 2012 and currently serves as a deputy minority leader in the Oregon State Senate.] plan to meet with local public safety officials Wednesday in Grants Pass to listen to their concerns.

The temporary state aid could be in the millions of dollars, if Gov. Kate Brown and the Oregon Legislature agree. That's a big if.

"Is the Legislature predisposed to release this much money?" said Wilson, R-Grants Pass. "It's sometimes very hard to come up with half a million."

Wilson, Baertschiger and Rep. Duane Stark, R-Grants Pass, were invited to the meeting after members of the Local Public Safety Coordinating Council two weeks ago unanimously agreed that a local public safety fiscal emergency exists or is expected to occur next year due to dwindling county payments from the federal government.

A month ago, county Commissioner Cheryl Walker proposed asking the governor to declare an emergency, invoking provisions of an untested 2013 law known as House Bill 3343. The bill authorizes an agreement between the state and a county to provide funding for up to 18 months.

But Baertschiger does not think his fellow legislators will be willing to help.

"The conversations I've had is, 'You guys need to figure out how to pay for this,'" he said.

"Some people say we're in a crisis," he added. "I don't think we're in a crisis situation."

The support of local legislators is considered important if the state is to be successfully lobbied for the aid, but Baertschiger feels confident that a local solution can be found, despite repeated voter defeats of local tax proposals to make up for declining federal payments to the county that once were meant to offset reduced timber tax revenue.

The reduction in federal subsidies resulted in huge layoffs at the Sheriff's Office in 2012 as well as the shuttering of the county juvenile shelter/detention facility. Further cuts are feared.

"We have to take into consideration it's been voted down how many times?" Baertschiger said. "That's the direction the majority of folks in the county want to go. This is one issue the citizens want to handle themselves.

"They're problems that can be resolved," he continued. "It's going to take some time. I have more confidence in my constituents solving them than the Oregon Legislature."

Wilson said he will tell council members about his concerns.

"That bill is so incredibly vague," he said. "I have read it five, six, seven times. It says it can be construed liberally. I've never seen that wording in a bill, ever.

"I have some real concerns about the bill itself, and what the bill will create," he continued. "It creates an intergovernmental entity that is invested with power. It looks like a potential Frankenstein."

At a glance

- What: Special meeting of the Josephine County Local Public Safety Coordinating Council
- When: 3:30 p.m. Wednesday
- Where: Marie Hill Conference Room, Josephine County Community Corrections, 510 N.W. Fourth St., Grants Pass
- Why: Local state legislators have been invited to discuss a recent council declaration that a public safety funding fiscal emergency exists or is imminent in the county

The following are comments from the readers. In no way do they represent the view of The Daily Courier. (Please read comment rules.)

Athena wrote on Mar 29, 2016 6:57 PM:

" Too bad residents don't vote. The "majority" noted is less than 25% of eligible voters. I ask: what are the other solutions that can be implemented by July? "

Maverick wrote on Mar 30, 2016 10:32 AM:

" My question for Mr. Baerttschiger is, "What do you define as an emergency?" Maybe when we have no 24 hr patrols? Like Now! Or, no detective division in a county with 90'ish thousand people? Like Now! Or, maybe when the Oregon State Police Troopers are doing "Deputy Work" instead of protecting our states highways? Again, like now. Have you seen the traffic fatality statistics for Josephine County? Look at them. People are dying on "your roads" because NOBODY IS DOING PROACTIVE TRAFFIC ENFORCEMENT. As a legislator, your obligation is to our safety and that of our visitors. If it walks like a fiscal emergency, quakes like a fiscal emergency, well, its probably a fiscal emergency. Could not be more obvious to positive thinking citizens, and our local "Criminal Justice Professionals." "