

Officials say county is facing public safety fiscal emergency

Front Page News

March 17, 2016

By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

http://www.thedailycourier.com/articles/2016/03/17/front_page_news/news03.txt

Photo: From left, Josephine County Sheriff Dave Daniel, Legal Counsel Wally Hicks and Finance Director Arthur O'Hare attend a meeting Wednesday of the Local Public Safety Coordinating Council. The council voted to declare that the county was in a public safety funding crisis or about to be in one.

Josephine County is facing a public safety fiscal emergency, a group of local criminal justice system **officials declared** (emphasis added) Wednesday.

If the emergency isn't here already, it's on the way, with the already understaffed Sheriff's Office facing another round of budget cuts next year if funding isn't found, the **Local Public Safety Coordinating Council said** (emphasis added) .

The panel, which includes Sheriff Dave Daniel, presiding Circuit Judge Lindi Baker and District Attorney Ryan Mulkins, **voted unanimously** (emphasis added) Wednesday to make the declaration, thus beginning a process of asking for state emergency aid.

The **council voted** (emphasis added) to seek a meeting with state legislators from the region to smooth the way for possible action by Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, who could find that an emergency exists, and the state Legislature, which would authorize the aid, possibly in the millions of dollars.

The council avoided the need to decide if the county was currently in an emergency by merely deciding that one either existed or one was "imminent."

"Are we in an emergency now?" said Grants Pass Mayor Darin Fowler, who sits on the safety council. "**I think we are.**" (emphasis added)

"Are we in one now?" echoed Gary Berlant, another member of the council and head of the Josephine County Public Defender's Office. "I think we'll all agree we'll be in one if we get cut."

Budget cuts brought on by declining federal payments to the county essentially halved the Sheriff's Office in 2012, ending 24-hour patrol coverage, with more cuts expected next spring if federal payments continue to fall or stop altogether. County voters, meanwhile, have rejected four straight tax proposals to raise what is the lowest permanent property tax rate for county operations in Oregon at 58 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. The state average is about \$2.50 per \$1,000.

"We're looking at cutting that (current funding) in half again," county Finance Director Arthur O'Hare told the council.

Budget cuts also have closed the county's 30-bed juvenile shelter and detention facility and dropped the number of inmates held at the 262-bed county jail from 170 to 130. O'Hare said the upcoming cuts could mirror those in 2012, when the jail held only 60 inmates.

To stave that off, the county Board of Commissioners is mulling over a possible request to the governor for help, under provisions of an untested 2013 state law that allows the state to step in for 18 months to provide help, **if the cost of the aid is matched by the county** (emphasis added). The Legislature would have to act to authorize the state's portion.

What would happen after that 18 months is another question.

"Wouldn't this just be kicking the can again down the road?" Grants Pass Public Safety Director Bill Landis asked the council.

"It'd be better to have a can to kick," Sheriff Dave Daniel replied.

And Josephine Circuit Court Judge Lindi Baker wondered what would happen after the can was kicked, if no plan was in place for a permanent solution.

"If this county's not prepared to do that, what's the point?" she asked.

Then, and now

The Josephine County Sheriff's Office had 98 budgeted positions four years ago, but has 51 now, and its patrol force has been cut from 30 deputies then to 10. Its detective division is gone and its records division is one person.

To make up some of the shortfall, Oregon State Police troopers have been diverting from their highway patrols to answer life-threatening calls for service in rural areas of the county. And OSP detectives are investigating major crimes in rural areas.

The Josephine County Jail, which typically housed 170 inmates in the past, now is housing 130 on average. And, 30 of those inmates are being housed on contract with the city of Grants Pass, at a cost of \$1 million a year to city residents.