Unintended consequences could accompany state money
Editor’s Opinion
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Josephine County Commissioner Simon Hare has theorized that no tax increase would be necessary in order to declare a public safety "emergency" that could result in considerable financial aid from the state.

When the county begins its new fiscal year on July 1, it could be the final year of federal county payments, a program that assists counties that have seen revenue decline in tandem with dwindling timber harvests on federal land. These payments peaked about a decade ago at more than $12 million in Josephine County (many other counties also receive the payments). Over the past several years, the amount appropriated by Congress has steadily declined, with the goal of weaning counties off the subsidy.

The most recent renewal of the program came at the 11th hour, only after Congress had previously pledged it was eliminating the program. Although another renewal of the program is not out of the question, it's growing increasingly unlikely. Regardless of whether this revenue stream dries out at the end of the next fiscal year, Congress will eventually turn off the spigot.

Commissioner Cherryl Walker sparked a firestorm of controversy earlier this month when she drafted a letter to the state requesting that it declare a "public safety funding emergency" in Josephine County, paving the way for the state to step in. The law that would be invoked was approved by the Legislature in 2013. Although neither county is mentioned by name, it was widely understood the law was aimed at the funding situations in Josephine and Curry counties, which have the two lowest property tax rates in the state for county government operations.

The three-year-old law, House Bill 3453, has never been tested. Under the language of the law, the state would be in a position to raise certain taxes and fees in the county, but would still need voter approval for an increase in property taxes.

At least that's the theory. And it's all theory until the law is actually invoked. As with all untested laws, there's a pretty good chance there will be unanticipated effects.

But the most important thing to remember is that under the terms of this law, the "emergency" may not continue for more than 18 months. Then, we would find ourselves back at square one.

For about a decade now, each time the federal county payments program has been renewed, Congress has insisted it's just temporary — meant to assist counties until they can find a "permanent solution."
Invoking HB3453 would be no different. It would be just one more short-term funding boost, but hardly a long-term solution. Plus, it would almost certainly have unintended — and unpredictable — consequences and should, therefore, be avoided.

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