

Guest Opinions “Related” To Primary PSS Tax Measures

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AMY WELS

The time has come for me to say goodbye to the community I have considered home for the past 11 years. I did not choose the circumstances that have led to my family and I relocating from Josephine County. The voters have.

With the failure of the criminal justice levy, my position was eliminated.

I have been employed by Josephine County for the past 11 years as a juvenile probation officer, a job that I have loved throughout my tenure here. I have worked closely with my colleagues in my agency, as well as community partners, in order to serve the troubled youth in our county. I work with children most people choose to ignore: sexually offending youth, drug-addicted kids, kids who steal and burglarize others.

I have been passionate about helping the youth and families I have worked with in order to try to improve their life outcomes. I have seen some amazing things in my time here, and I have at times felt honored to witness the transformation of these young human beings.

These last several years in our county have been horrific to witness, mainly because I lack any power to change the course of what this place has become.

A little over a year ago, we closed our detention and shelter program. The youth served by these programs are a vulnerable population.

The shelter youth came from horrific home environments where unspeakable things were done to them. The shelter was just that, a safe place where the youth could live, be cared for and receive the services they so desperately needed. Many of the youth served in that program now live on the streets. Many I have met with have been repeatedly victimized since the closure of the shelter. Their future is bleak.

Closing the detention center has deeply affected the work that the Juvenile Department can do. It is very difficult to convince delinquent youth to change their behaviors when there is no consequence awaiting them — and they know it.

By the generosity of Jackson County, we are allowed to rent three beds to house our youth, and we have for the most part kept those beds full, with kids waiting to enter should a vacancy occur.

One of the worst moments of my career in this county came when I was forced to choose between releasing an Illinois Valley methamphetamine-using homeless youth or an Illinois

Valley heroin-using youth, because we had only one bed available. Under the current budget constraints, we cannot serve the most vulnerable youth in this community, and honestly, part of me is relieved to be moving to a county that values the job that I do, in which such gut-wrenching decisions are unnecessary.

While living here, my husband and I have welcomed two beautiful daughters into our lives. The older will begin kindergarten in September. Local schools, especially those in the Three Rivers District, are not well-funded, nor do they seem to be supported by the majority of voters in this county. Critical programs continue to be cut to the bone, making me grateful to be taking my children away from this place.

One of the most embarrassing casualties of the last few years has been our library system. The closure of the library was truly unbelievable. Kudos to the director and volunteers who keep it open currently. My family members have always been huge supporters of libraries. My husband has even volunteered there over the last couple of years. Unfortunately, the library system here is gasping for air and needs a permanent funding solution. It is a critical component of a civilized society.

This community is losing doctors, highly trained law enforcement and professional people and currently seems to attract only professional transients. This is no longer an enjoyable or a safe place to live. The criminal justice system has been ravaged and will be in a significantly worse place next year.

There are fantastic people trying to devise a solution, but their efforts have not yet been successful. The answer is a simple one: If a community wishes to have basic services, those services must be paid for.

Of the 36 counties in this state, we pay the lowest rate for county services and would've continued to be among the lowest even if the levy had passed. This continuing situation is ridiculous. The naysayers point to "government waste" and their examples generally include state and federal issues, not local ones. I wonder if they need a basic civics lesson.

Suing the government for logging rights is another ridiculous "answer." Not only do we not have the funds to pay for legal counsel to do this, it would take decades, and the odds of a win are certainly not in our favor. I am hopeful that the state Legislature will come up with a solution to fund basic services in this community. Their solution will likely be much more expensive than the last levy request, but something must be done.

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Amy Wels is now a probation officer for adults in Polk County after her Josephine County position was eliminated Monday.