

A search for public safety answers

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The Hugo Neighborhood Association & Historical Society has formed a Justice System Exploratory Committee (JSEC), to work on understanding the problems and issues of Josephine County's Justice System & Public Safety Services (JS&PSS). The mission of the committee is to independently research the Josephine County JS&PSS issue and publicly provide its analysis through website publications. Since 2013 the JSEC has been working to educate itself and the citizenry by web publishing educational brochures on the issue.

The 2012 expiration of federal Secure Rural Schools payments to Josephine County, used mostly for public safety services, resulted in four county tax levies and one city sales tax offered as solutions. They all failed. There is a high probability for another levy to be on a future ballot. Public services are needed, even though the form and cost are issues.

After the second levy failed, the JSEC asked the question, "What can we do to shed some light on the issues?" The JSEC believed that the first important step was to identify the complex reasons the levies failed. The committee believes that the identification of citizen issues is the most important step in developing a successful study design.

So what is Josephine County's Justice System and Public Safety Services problem/issue? First, what are the public safety services (PSS) being referred to? Second, what is the issue? The third, and perhaps most important question is: "Is there a problem, and if so, judged by what standards?" These three public safety questions are asked within the context of the committee's four core values:

1. All citizens, voters, votes and values are legitimate, pro and con.
2. Fair representation of all values.
3. Neutral point of view.
4. Public is decision maker.

First question: What are the PSS being referred to? Six public safety services, proposed for funding since 2012, are generally considered the major components of the county's historic PSS program: 1. Adult jail beds. 2. Juvenile justice. 3. District Attorney's Office. 4. Rural patrol deputies. 5. Criminal investigations and related Sheriff's Office support services. 6. Animal protection.

Second question: What is the issue? We have several sub-questions: Is crime the problem (i.e., the reason for the levies)? In general, crime is felonies, misdemeanors, and/or violations. Felony crime includes personal crimes, such as murder, robbery, and rape, and crimes against property,

including burglary and larceny. Are the potential causes of crime the problem, causes like low incomes, homelessness, poverty, unemployment, and economic problems? Is funding public safety services the problem, with failed levies, mistrust in government, taxes, cumulative costs, and income inequality? Is there a problem with the level of safety services? Examples of "level" in PSS are the responses to 911 calls, rural patrol presence, number of adult jail beds available, jailed and released, use of resources, diverted monies, and service levels identified by citizens they are willing to fund. Is the problem a feeling of fear of being a victim of crime versus the belief that you can take care of your family if the situation arose? Is part of the problem because Josephine County citizens have never had to understand and debate needed levels and funding for public safety? This situation is because historically the county government made the decisions to pass through Federal O&C payments to be used mostly for public safety. The public was never really involved in these decisions. Is the problem a feeling that we have considered all potential solutions, and tried what we thought were reasonable, only to have them fail, arriving at a point of not knowing exactly what to do next? What we need to know is by what means, if any, a single one or a combination of different ones, might we meaningfully address the PSS problem?

Finally, is there a problem, and if so, judged by what standards? A scientific study of the standards the governor of Oregon would use to proclaim a public safety fiscal emergency when fiscal conditions compromise Josephine County's ability to provide a minimally adequate level of public safety services would help answer the question, "Is there a problem?"

Before the governor could conduct this analysis, she must have first received a request from the Josephine County Board of Commissioners, seeking a declaration of a fiscal emergency. The rationale for the declaration request must be because the commissioners' analysis finds that the county is in a state of fiscal distress that compromises its ability to provide a minimally adequate level of PSS.

For more information and clarification, please go to web page:

www.hugoneighborhood.org/justicesystemexploratorycommittee.htm

Jon Whalen was raised in Hugo and now resides in Grants Pass. He is a member of the Hugo Neighborhood Association & Historical Society's Justice System Exploratory Committee.