

April 28, 2014. Jay Meredith. Pro: Citizen-Driven Tax Initiative Would Restore Safety During Funding Crunch (Guest Opinion)

- Jay Meredith. April 28, 2014. *How Should You Vote On Measure 17-66? Pro: Citizen-Driven Tax Initiative Would Restore Safety During Funding Crunch* (Guest Opinion). The Grants Pass Daily Courier. Grants Pass, OR.

Securing Our Safety was formed during 2012's budget challenges (federal timber dollars going away) that shut down much of our county's criminal justice system. SOS, comprised of business owners, community leaders, parents, retirees and other residents, set out to explore ideas to address long-term county needs and the means to fund them.

The public safety situation facing the county is the most imminent public threat facing every resident. Even if you think you can protect yourself, your family and property 24/7/365, the fallout of our situation is affecting the safety of our roads, insurance rates, home values, quality of life, job market and more. As the situation worsens, we cannot afford to put our heads in the sand and wait for a magical solution.

SOS has learned, through exhaustive research and public input, that there is no single solution, and simply cutting expenses, as some suggest, is not a solution at all. Over the last 10 years, extreme cuts to county services and workforce have gutted the public safety system and threatened other services (such as the library) as funds are diverted from those services in an attempt to shore up public safety.

Our "citizen-voiced plan" started nearly two years ago with the input from citizens — collecting surveys and listening to input from Josephine County residents. Not only have we found out what you want out of our local public safety systems but we found out what funding solutions you desire. It was clear we all want to restore our criminal justice services to not only where they were a few years ago but better. A statistical survey amounts to about 400 to 500 people, but we collected close to 1,200 surveys of Josephine County residents quickly after our organization came together.

It has also become clear that an increase in local taxes, smaller than proposed in the past, must be part of a multi-pronged effort that will also include possible longer-term revenues generated by a lottery initiative, environmentally responsible mining and mineral development efforts, and timber harvesting on county-owned land. And we need to keep fighting on the timber equation on federal land as well. We are also working on drug and crime prevention programs that will make our county safer and the criminal justice system a more effective and efficient system.

At a simple level, we have a hole in our county's criminal justice system of at least \$12 million per year due to dwindling "federal payments." We have a revenue problem, plain and simple. SOS is very proud of what the draft of the citizen voiced plan looks like today after much work and research. However, some of the solutions in the works will take time to implement (years in

some cases). The citizen-voiced plan is an intentional mix of tax and non-tax solutions that will restore health to our county and our county's public safety system and based on all the solutions favored by your input.

The five-year levy we'll vote on next month is citizen driven, not a county government initiative, and at a cost of \$1.19 per \$1,000 assessed value, is more affordable than past proposals. It will provide about \$7.6 million in annual funding and is restricted for use in the county's criminal justice system — the system that serves the entire county whether you live in Grants Pass, Cave Junction, or in the unincorporated parts of Josephine County. Federal payments may or may not continue, but even if they do, the current level is only about \$4 million per year, and many think that won't continue. The levy will restore critical pieces of the public safety system — jail operations and re-opening of the Juvenile Justice Center. Funds currently used for limited jail services will be re-directed to increase sheriff's patrols.

Passage of the Jail/Juvenile Justice Center levy will provide a bridge to restoring our county's safety as we work to generate additional, sustainable revenues through those additional efforts outlined above. If the levy fails, even more devastating cuts are on the horizon.

We urge you to vote YES on the Jail/Juvenile Justice Center levy, Measure 17-59. If you are not yet registered to vote, you have until April 29 to register for the May 20 election. We also invite you to join our meetings and/or email list as we work together as a community to solve the challenges ahead and make Josephine County an even greater place to live. Please visit us at www.SecuringOurSafety.org.

Jay Meredith is president and board chairman for the nonprofit citizens group Securing Our Safety, which has been pursuing various options for public safety funding in Josephine County.