

May 3, 2013. Pat Fahey. *Let's Control Our Destiny And Vote Yes* (Guest Opinion)

- Pat Fahey. May 3, 2013. *Let's Control Our Destiny And Vote Yes* (Guest Opinion). The Grants Pass Daily Courier. Grants Pass, OR.

If you are a registered voter in Josephine County, you will soon receive your ballot for the upcoming May 21 election. Depending on where you live, you may have several different issues on your ballot, but what I wish to discuss today is 17-49, the Josephine County criminal justice and public safety levy. The levy is a three-year, \$1.48 per \$1,000 additional tax on the assessed valuation of property located in Josephine County. The proceeds of this levy are to be used only for criminal justice issues.

I often get asked, "What does that mean?" A quick look at the ballot summary shows:

- Increase inmate capacity at adult jail
- Increase in number of criminal cases prosecuted by district attorney
- Provide school security program and resources
- Provide support for Animal Protection field services
- Provide Juvenile Justice services and detention
- Increase sheriff's deputies' response and patrol
- Provide support for Sheriff's Office civil services (investigations, evidence, records and court security)

One might ask, "Why do we need this levy now, what has changed?" This question requires a little history lesson. In 1937, the federal government set aside 2.4 million acres of federal forest land for the economic benefit of 18 western Oregon counties, of which Josephine is one. For decades, the receipt of timber sales on these properties was the primary source of revenue for Josephine County. Often the sales were so good that Josephine County didn't collect its local property tax at all. That is one of the reasons that the Josephine County permanent tax rate is only 58 cents per \$1,000, the lowest rate for Oregon counties.

Since the 1980s, there has been increased pressure by the environmental community to restrict the harvest of timber, frequently using the Endangered Species Act as the basis for legal challenges. The pressure was so great and the resulting timber receipts dropped so low that the federal government stepped in with a series of safety net measures, providing declining funding for counties impacted by the loss of this revenue. In 2012, Josephine County received what appears to be the last of these payments.

So here we are in 2013 with no federal aid available to fund county government. This is a loss of \$12 million a year from what the county once received. This means the county must live with what it generates in taxes and fees. Since the criminal justice sector (district attorney, sheriff, jail) is by far the largest budget area, it must bear the largest burden of the cuts.

The cuts to criminal justice so far have been draconian. The Juvenile Justice center has closed. We have reduced the District Attorney's Office by three assistant district attorneys. The Sheriff's Office answers calls only from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. There used to be almost 200 jail beds available. Now, there are only 99, of which 30 are federally contracted, and most of the remainder are occupied by prisoners serving mandatory terms under Measure 11, the mandatory sentencing law.

The best indicator of how far the system has fallen was highlighted last week in two separate instances. One was the daylight mugging of an elderly lady in the Applebee's parking lot, and the other was how the system dealt with the armed criminal lurking near Redwood Elementary School. He was ticketed and released.

I have often heard comments such as "I have a gun and I can protect myself." That is good. Public safety begins at home. But we should remember that there are those who cannot protect themselves: children, the elderly and the infirm. And how do we protect our belongings when we are not at home? A gun is a useful tool for self-defense, but we also need a healthy criminal justice community to investigate crimes, prosecute those accused of crimes and incarcerate those found guilty.

The levy will economically affect all. It will cost money. To see the impact of the levy, a property owner may browse to <http://www.co.josephine.or.us/> and find out the additional tax for a specific piece of property.

The cost of the levy has led many in our community to voice their opposition. They have a valid point, and I appreciate their avoiding personal attacks that so often happen during the political process. I offer them my thanks.

This is truly a values decision. Is the cost of the levy worth the level of public safety it would provide, and if we don't pass the levy, will the governor step in and impose what he considers the minimal acceptable level of services and bill us later (House Bill 3453)?

Josephine County has come to a fork in the road. Business as usual is no longer possible. We choose to control our own destiny and pay our own way by voting yes. By voting no, we let the county limp toward the abyss and see what the governor will do.

I know what my course of action will be, and I urge my fellow citizens to join me in voting yes on 17-49.

o o o

Pat Fahey is a Grants Pass businessman who has been a spokesman for Securing Our Safety, a local citizens group trying to find ways to improve Josephine County's criminal justice system.