

**April 27, 2012. Josephine County commissioners Simon Hare, Don Reedy and Harold Haugen. *Passage of levy crucial for county* (Guest Opinion)**

- Josephine County commissioners Simon Hare, Don Reedy and Harold Haugen. April 27, 2012. *Passage of levy crucial for county* (Guest Opinion). The Grants Pass Daily Courier. Grants Pass, OR.

By now you have probably heard about the criminal justice levy. The Josephine County Board of Commissioners is committed to this effort and feels it is important voters understand the facts.

The situation is serious. This is not a scare tactic.

On May 15, voters will have the opportunity — and the responsibility — to decide the future of our community. The question is simple: What level of crime are we willing to tolerate? The answer to this question is not in the hands of the district attorney, the sheriff or the county commissioners. Both the choice and the consequences are entirely up to the voters.

In putting the levy before the voters, the commissioners have sought nothing more than the minimum level of funding necessary to keep basic criminal justice functions operating. Funds from the levy will not be used for any purpose other than to fund the criminal justice system.

Why is the county asking property owners to pay more taxes in these tough times? The frank answer is that there is no other practical alternative. Congress has failed to live up to its obligation to timber counties like ours. According to the 1937 O&C Act, O&C timberlands are to be managed for "permanent forest production with timber to be sold, cut and removed for the purpose of providing a permanent source of timber supply ... and contributing to the economic stability of local communities and industries."

Despite this stipulation, timber production on federal lands has fallen off by more than 90 percent since the 1980s.

For years, federal funding, so-called "county payments," has paid for essential public safety services in O&C counties. That funding has declined dramatically and is unlikely to be renewed for the 2012-2013 budget year. The expected shortfall this budget year is roughly \$12 million, or a reduction of two-thirds. This is the budgetary crisis we face.

Without an immediate change in federal timber policy or reprieve from lawsuits on timber harvests, the only remaining option is to turn to our local community for the funds necessary to sustain essential criminal justice operations. This is not a long-term solution.

The board has prepared a budget with the assumption that there will not be federal funds or any additional property tax revenue for fiscal year 2012-2013. State law requires that the county adopt a balanced budget no later than June 30.

If the criminal justice levy fails, the county will see a 70 percent reduction in the public safety system.

- Jail capacity will be reduced from 150 to 30 beds for only the most violent inmates. All others — including sexual predators, those charged with breaking and entering, auto theft, assault and domestic violence — will be charged and released.
- The juvenile detention and shelter facility will be closed. Juvenile suspects will be charged and released, and the shelter for abused children will be closed.
- Deputy district attorneys will be reduced from 9 to 5. Only the most serious cases will be prosecuted. Others, including property crimes and many sexual assault and domestic violence cases, will not be prosecuted.
- No patrols in the county. Sheriff Gil Gilbertson will respond to all calls personally and only in the case of life-threatening emergencies.
- Three contract deputies will be available for backup, reduced from 21.
- The Sheriff's Office will be cut from 98 employees to 28.

In the near future, continued cuts are inevitable because this year's \$2.3 million in carryover funds will be depleted.

County and city voters must understand that we are all in this together. We all rely on the jail to house criminals and keep them off the streets. We all rely on the District Attorney's Office to prosecute cases. We all rely on the Juvenile Justice Center to care for challenged and abused youth.

We understand no one wants to pay more taxes. Government spending sometimes seems unrealistic and out of control. The commissioners began preparing for this massive revenue loss some time ago by reorganizing the workforce, consolidating departments and reducing the number of county employees from nearly 600 a few years ago to some 390 today. These changes have saved millions of dollars.

If voters turn down the levy, all city and county residents will feel the result, and the effect will last for years. Consider how increased crime affects quality of life to lower property values and impacts recruitment of new businesses and home buyers to the area. Don't be fooled, there will be a price to pay either way you vote — nothing is free.

If you vote yes, you will be voting to contain this budgetary crisis and continue funding for essential services long enough for your elected leaders to develop a long-term, sustainable fiscal plan for the county.

The decision is yours, and now is the time to act. This board will not put this issue before the voters again. You must decide, will there be meaningful law enforcement and criminal prosecution in Josephine County — or not? Vote with sober reflection on what sort of future you want for our community. Vote wisely. But above all, make sure you vote.

To learn more, please visit [www.youdecidejoco.com](http://www.youdecidejoco.com).

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Josephine County Commissioner Simon Hare was elected and took office in January 2011. Commissioner Don Reedy was appointed in August to replace retiring Commissioner Dwight Ellis, while Commissioner Harold Haugen was appointed in January to replace former Commissioner Sandi Cassanelli, who was recalled.

Editor's note: A "no" on the levy Guest Opinion will be published Saturday.