

Some improvements, but trouble ahead (State of the County Addresses)

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Jan. 7, 2016.

p. 3A, *The Grants Pass Daily Courier*

http://www.thedailycourier.com/articles/2016/01/07/z_mobile_news/mobile_com/news03.txt

Photo. Josephine County Commissioner Cheryl Walker addresses a question during her State of the County address on Wednesday.

The county's parks, airport and health departments are knocking it out of the park while its residents should be wary of an approaching "fiscal cliff," Josephine County Commissioner Cheryl Walker told the Grants Pass Rotary Club in a State of the County address Wednesday.

Walker began her address with a short video that detailed how the Animal Control department is using a dedicated property tax levy passed in 2014. At 8 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, the cash has paid for expanded hours, staff hirings and facility improvements.

Animal Control has spayed or neutered 700 pets and facilitated 1,100 adoptions since the levy passed.

"But that isn't the only success we've had this year," Walker said.

Moody's, a company that measures the creditworthiness of public and commercial firms, officially removed Josephine County's "negative outlook" rating.

"That improves funding and financing opportunities," Walker said.

She also talked about the removal of Dimmick Tower and a collaboration between the Board of Commissioners and Food & Friends to find a new home for the senior-meals program.

But the effect of a new budget crunch on public safety, which could damage the county's credit rating, among other things, dominated the latter half of Walker's address. [emphasis added] For years, Josephine County relied on timber receipts to fund public safety and other vital services.

When those payments waned in the 1990s, Congress agreed to maintain funding with direct subsidies.

But in 2011, these federal payments began to decline, resulting in widespread layoffs that decimated the Sheriff's Office, which by law must run the county jail and which no longer has 24-hour patrol coverage or a detective division.

"When you see the Josephine County forestry payments, they drop off to practically nothing," Walker said. [emphasis added]

She later added that U.S. Sens. Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden and Rep. Greg Walden "said they're

not interested in pursuing legislation" to extend or renew the subsidies, often referred to as "county payments." [emphasis added]

Walker also emphasized that **declining county payments don't just affect public safety.** [emphasis added]

"It has affected every department in the county. [emphasis added] Most departments have had to shrink to make up the loss of funding" and keep the Sheriff's Office afloat, she said.

Although she's pursuing specific levies like the Animal Control tax to place on the May ballot, Walker didn't discuss them during her speech. But she did mention that any property tax measure passed after the May primaries would be too little too late because property tax bills come due in October.

Wait for the general election this November she said, and those new taxes wouldn't be collected until October 2017. In the meantime, even the reduced county payments that fund the county jail will be gone on July 1, 2017.

"We have 18 months to get it done," Walker said. "I'm open to any suggestions."

If that date passes, the only alternative the commissioners have discussed lies in an Oregon House bill passed in 2013 that allows county officials to turn to the governor for emergency public safety funding. [emphasis added]

"In that instance, (Salem) would set the rate and we would pay half of it," she said. [emphasis added]

During a question-and-answer section, one Rotarian asked about an Oregon House resolution from 2015 that would have set, statewide, a minimum permanent county property tax rate of \$2 per \$1,000 of assessed value. Most counties are above the line. Josephine County's rate, the lowest in the state, is 58 cents. [emphasis added]

As far as Walker knew, the bill was dropped, with some of its provisions rolled into legislation to be discussed in February. [emphasis added]

Other questions included if the county or other organizations had plans to challenge the federal government's ownership of land in Josephine County. Walker said the Association of O&C Counties may be working on something, but that litigation would be extremely expense. [emphasis added]

As incoming chairperson of the Board of Commissioners, it was up to Walker to make the annual State of the County presentation. Vice chairman for 2016 is Keith Heck. A report in Wednesday's paper incorrectly stated that Commissioner Simon Hare had been named vice chairman.

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