

Walker's 'a la carte' tax levy idea strikes out

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Photo. Cherryl Walker couldn't get the support of her fellow commissioners on her "a la carte" idea.

The Josephine County Board of Commissioners has quickly ditched talk of "a la carte" property tax levies for public safety, instead opting to ask voters whether the state should take over operating the Josephine County Jail.

The board on Thursday morning decided to drop Commissioner Cherryl Walker's proposal to place four public safety levies on the May primary ballot, one each for jail operations, sheriff's patrols, juvenile justice and the district attorney's office.

Commissioner Keith Heck has consistently voiced his opposition to the proposal, save for one meeting where he said he would be willing to "give it the old college try."

Walker was hoping to persuade Commissioner Simon Hare, who reaffirmed his skepticism Thursday about the a la carte approach's viability at the ballot.

"It's a constructive and creative solution that hasn't specifically been put to the voters," he said. "But I don't see it in the climate or timing. I don't think it's going to be successful."

The Board of Commissioners have been exploring ways to fund public safety as federal subsidies to replace lost timber revenue are phased out by Congress. Voters, however, have rejected four straight attempts since 2012 to increase the county's tax rate of 58 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value, the lowest rate in Oregon.

The lack of funding for public safety has resulted in the 262-bed jail operating at half-capacity — and there would be even more empty jail beds if not for a decision by the city of Grants Pass to rent 30 beds for suspects arrested by city police. Meanwhile, the rest of the Sheriff's Office is so understaffed that it has no detective division and can't provide 24-hour patrol coverage, relying instead on the Oregon State Police at night.

In an interview after the meeting, Hare expressed concerns that funding the public safety system piece by piece could result in undesirable situations.

If voters approved funding for patrols and not the jail or the district attorney's office, Hare said, you'd have deputies capturing criminals and almost immediately putting them back out on the street. Fund the jail and patrols but not the district attorney and you'd have a bottleneck in the courts due to a lack of prosecutors.

"You don't get to pick," he said. "It just doesn't work if you don't fund it as a system."

Walker knows how the system works. In her estimation, letting voters see the results of partly funding Josephine County law enforcement would give them an idea of how the departments interact.

"I think it was an experiment worth trying," she said in an interview after the meeting.

Hare mulled his decision over for weeks, he said, because he wants to give his colleagues' ideas proper consideration before reaching a conclusion.

"I always want to give respect to the other commissioners, to hear them out," he said.

Even though the Board of Commissioners isn't sponsoring a property tax levy to fund public safety on the May ballot, it will ask voters how they feel about having the state take over parts of the system. [emphasis added]

House Bill 3453, passed in 2013, allows the governor to declare a state of emergency and take over operations and funding for a county jail. There's just one catch: County administrators would need to officially request the takeover. [emphasis added]

The commissioners asked the legal department to draft the advisory question for the ballot. Voters, not commissioners, Hare said, should be the ones to decide whether the state controls the jail.

"That decision is above my pay grade," he said.

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