

## ***State bailout question gets tabled***

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Despite painting a gloomy picture of crime in the county, the Josephine County Board of Commissioners on Wednesday postponed asking voters whether they're interested in pursuing a state bailout.

The question originally planned for the May ballot reads: "In your opinion, should Josephine County ask the state to provide resources to the County for criminal justice services?"

It was tabled after Commissioner Simon Hare remarked the time is "not ripe" now, because any fiscal emergency declaration couldn't happen until after the 2017 state legislative session.

The process stems from a law passed by Oregon Legislature in 2013 that allows county officials to petition the governor to declare a "state of fiscal emergency" and to work out a plan to split the costs of underwriting criminal justice.

Josephine County's fiscal woes are well-documented, with cuts to the jail, the District Attorney's office, juvenile justice and sheriff's patrols beginning in 2012. Voters, meanwhile, have rejected four property tax levy requests since 2012 that would have raised the county's lowest-in-the-state permanent tax rate of 58 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value for public safety.

Commissioners want to know what voters think about a potential fiscal emergency declaration.

During several meetings and interviews with the Daily Courier, all three commissioners have said that a definitive vote, such as a 60-40 majority either way, will likely determine their decision.

"I wouldn't ask the question if I didn't want to know," Hare said in a previous interview. Hare said the forecast for the 2016-17 fiscal year beginning July 1 is similar to the current fiscal year, with the last of federal county payments of \$4.3 million set to expire at the conclusion of the 2016-17 fiscal year.

"It's the (2017-18) budget cycle when the annual payment isn't likely to come in without some legislative Hail Marys," Hare said, adding it "may or may not trigger" the need for a fiscal emergency declaration.

County payments, which have gone by different legislative names over the years, have poured \$12 million or more per year to the county since the mid-1990s, supplementing and then replacing timber-generated tax revenue to fund public safety.

At their peak, they also provided money for parks, libraries and other county services.

The payments have been extended several times but have dwindled as Congress has insisted the program cannot continue indefinitely. If the governor were to declare a state of emergency, the governor and the Board of Commissioners would negotiate funding over the next 18 months. The governor could then extend the proclamation another 18 months.

Any proclamation would also have to be done with input from leaders in the Oregon Legislature, local representatives and senators, as well as the sheriff.

Despite holding off on the advisory vote, on Wednesday commissioners painted a bleak picture of the state of criminal justice in the county.

Keith Heck pointed to an increase burglaries and vandalism in Cave Junction, including recent break-ins at Illinois Valley High School and Evergreen Elementary, the trashing of the Cave Junction library branch and a break-in at a local Dutch Bros. coffee stand.

"Anybody who says there's a decline in criminal activity in Josephine County, I don't know who they're talking to," Heck said.