

Walker defends public safety proposal as meeting heats up

Front Page News

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By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

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Photo. SHAUN HALL/Daily Courier Joseph Rice, standing at right, addresses the Josephine County Board of Commissioners Wednesday during an often-raucous meeting, at which the hot topic was funding for public safety.

Josephine County Commissioner Cheryl Walker on Wednesday defended her recommendation that local officials should ask Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to declare a public safety fiscal emergency in Josephine County, opening the door to state assistance — and a tax increase.

The assistance could go so far as to include state management of the county jail and other public safety services, with Salem providing funding for half the cost of those services. The county would provide the other half — possibly by raising taxes or fees under a 2013 state law, House Bill 3453.

In a county where voters have rejected four public safety levy requests since 2012, Walker's proposal drew heated comments — and equally heated responses from Walker, who is seeking re-election this year.

"I'm charged with maintaining order. I don't give a rip ... I don't need this job," she said during a raucous Board of Commissioners meeting at Anne Basker Auditorium in downtown Grants Pass.

Walker and her colleagues are struggling with how to plan for a looming "fiscal cliff" when federal subsidies expire in July 2017 without reauthorization by Congress.

The subsidies, often referred to as county payments and other 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 to less than \$5 million as Congress has insisted the program cannot continue indefinitely.

A week after commissioners decided to delay an advisory vote on the question, Walker's personal stance on the subject was apparent after she released a draft letter Tuesday calling for the governor's intervention.

Such an intervention is possible under HB3453, which was lobbied by then-Gov. John Kitzhaber specifically because of the shaky funding structure for public safety in Josephine and Curry counties, which have the lowest permanent property tax rates in the state at 58 and 59 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value, respectively. The state average is about \$2.50.

"We have a public safety fiscal emergency in Josephine County," Walker wrote in the draft to fellow Commissioners Keith Heck and Simon Hare, asking them to endorse it.

Heck and Hare deferred discussion on the matter until March 10.

Walker's proposal prompted a heated public response Wednesday during the commissioners' weekly business meeting. At one point during the session, as opposition voices in the audience grew to shouts, coughs and heckling, Walker pounded the gavel and tried to cut off the public comment period, only to be overruled by Heck and Hare.

Prior to Wednesday's business session, commissioner candidate Dale Matthews had aired news of the draft letter on his website, badcounty.com.

"I told a few people about your meeting yesterday morning," Matthews told commissioners during a public comment period that stretched to an hour of sometimes emotional accusations and assertions.

Matthews referred to the letter as an affront to voters, who have repeatedly turned down tax proposals to fund public safety services.

"Don't do it," he told commissioners.

In her draft letter, Walker pointed to the decline in funding for public safety services, and resulting cuts to the number of county employees, including public safety workers. Walker thanked the Oregon State Police for filling some of the gap in patrol and detective services, but bemoaned crime levels, especially a spate of vandalism and burglaries in Cave Junction that included a break-in at the local library.

"Murders have increased, requiring the state to investigate because we do not have any detectives," she said. "Burglaries are so frequent as to be considered by many to be part of our culture."

Walker said cuts at the 262-bed Josephine County Jail have resulted in many offenders being released. Later on Wednesday, the Grants Pass City Council extended a utility fee that pays for extra beds at the jail, which operates at half-capacity.

"We simply do not have the jail staff to hold offenders," Walker wrote in her draft letter.

The number of people working for the county dropped from 415 four years ago, compared with just over 300 now, Walker wrote.

In the last five years, the number of budgeted Sheriff's Office deputy positions has been cut nearly in half — from 98 to 51 — resulting in cuts to patrol, jail and investigation services. The county does not have 24-hour patrol coverage — most deputies work in the jail.

And the number of Juvenile Department employees dropped by two-thirds — 29 then compared to nine now — as the county's juvenile shelter and detention facility in downtown Grants Pass was closed to save money.

More funding and personnel cuts are expected next year, with declines in federal subsidies to the county expected to continue, Walker said.

"We hereby respectfully request that you consider these conditions and determine that a public safety fiscal emergency exists in Josephine County and provide assistance," she wrote.

The March 10 meeting to discuss the matter further probably will be set for 9 a.m. in the commission's meeting room in the Josephine County Courthouse.

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