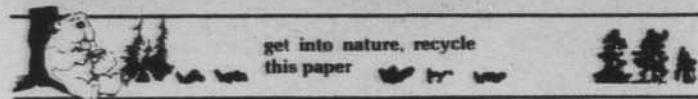


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County law enforcement hangs on voter tax levy

By Steve Hooks
 Of the Emerald

County officials painted a dark scenario of the effects of a reduced county law enforcement budget to the Lane County Bar Association at Tuesday's meeting.

To head off the county's budget shortfall and consequential cuts in services, the county is asking voter approval of a \$10 million tax-base increase in the May 18 primary election.

By state law, the county's tax-base may not increase by more than 6 percent without voter consent. If voters approve the ballot measure, the county can collect \$14.2 million in homeowners' property taxes next year. That compares with

\$4.2 million collected this year, according to county figures.

Mike Williams, county budget committee vice-chairman, told the lurching lawyers that if voters do not approve the increase, "Lane County faces a financial disaster of the first order of magnitude."

Williams and other county officials are part of a task force, Advocates For Lane County, formed to drum up support for the coming ballot measure vote. He and three county law enforcement officials painted a "worse case" scenario of the budget cuts' effects on the legal system.

Sheriff David Burks said the county public safety department would lose 49 police officers. His patrol division, already understaffed, would be reduced to seven officers next year from its current 26, he said. The department consisted of 54 patrol officers only two years ago.

Burks said the department is "fast losing ability to respond" to calls. For example, Lane County parks could deteriorate due to crimes like vandalism because his department wouldn't be able to patrol them as often, he said.

Burks also said his staff of investigators would decline to three. He employed 16 investigators two years ago.

District Attorney Pat Horton

and Court Administrator William Linden described how overcrowded and understaffed courts would add problems to an already inadequate law enforcement division.

Horton said the prosecutor's office faces a possible loss of 16 attorneys and a 65 percent reduction of its paralegal staff. He added that the district court already handles "volumes" of cases.

Linden said the possible 45 percent cut in the county court operating budget would cut the administrative staff in half.

"The judges would be ready to go to trial, the attorneys would be ready to go to trial," but no courtroom staff would be available for a trial in some cases, he said.

If the tax base fails at the May primary, the county would ask voters to approve \$3 million on an "A" ballot in June. Any other levy, termed a "B" ballot, would not receive the property tax relief from the state that the May ballot would get. County budget officials said the "B" ballot would be almost impossible to pass, based on historical trends.

The failure of the tax initiative would reduce Lane County government to a level of service reminiscent of the depression years, according to a handout at the meeting.

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The Oregon Daily Emerald is published Monday through Friday except during finals week and vacations by the Oregon Daily Emerald Publishing Co.

News 686-5511
 Advertising/Business 686-3712
 Classifieds 686-4343
 Production 686-4381

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