

Officials say levy ignores issues

By Vegar Stokset
Emerald Contributor

Voters should say "no" to the \$5.80 a year law enforcement levy on the March 23 ballot because some of the programs it funds are run inefficiently, several local officials said.

Ron Chase, director of Sponsors Inc., a company that provides transitional services to ex-convicts in Lane County, said the Community Corrections Center and the Forest Work Camp are wrongly used for offenders who pose little or no risk to public safety.

"Almost 40 percent of the levy dollars are used on programs for lower risk offenders who do not need treatment," Chase said. "Instead, those programs should be dealing with the more dangerous criminals who currently walk the streets of Eugene."

Chase said the sheriff's office operates with "fear-of-failure" policies. Higher risk criminals are currently denied access to the community corrections programs because they are perceived as less likely to succeed, Chase said.

Capt. Ben Sunderland at the sheriff's office said it can not let dangerous offenders into the minimum security programs and this prevents them from serving some criminals. Sunderland acknowledged these criminals currently fall in between jail and alternative programs.

Sunderland said Lane County policymakers continuously examine and try to target programs to the right group of offenders.

Makers will perceive it as an endorsement of past policies and lose the incentive for change. Chase said the sheriff is currently putting repeat drunken drivers, shoplifters and municipal code violators in the costly corrections program. It costs \$106 a day to keep offenders in the forest camp.

"Instead of wasting \$1.5 million annually on low risk offenders in the forest camp, the money should be directed into local treatment programs for sex-offenders and offenders with substance abuse problems," Chase said.

Chase criticized the underutilization of the programs. Both the Forest Work Camp and the corrections center have been running below capacity while other Human Services treatment slots are filled up and long waiting lists remain.

The corrections center, with the capacity of 76 inmates, only served 44 people last month, Chase said. In addition, the forest camp has a capacity to take care of 30 more offenders.

Dave Koch, branch officer of probation and parole, also questioned the effectiveness of current community corrections policies.

Koch said it is wrong for local law enforcement officials to tell voters crime will soar if the levy does not pass. The fact is that many lower risk offenders can manage fine without supervision, Koch said.

The state department of corrections intends to spend less on prison beds and more on community treatment of higher risk offender. This can be done without compromising public safety, Koch said.

"In the budget crunch we are in now, we have to be careful where we put our money," Koch said. "I believe focusing on the higher-risk offenders is the best long-term investment."

He said he also believes the sheriff's programs should include a broader range of criminals, including parole and probation violators. Koch wants to see more cost-effective programs in the county that deal especially with substance abusers and sex offenders.

Koch is afraid that if the levy passes, nothing will change in the way the county is dealing with criminals.

"If a voter's say 'yes' to the law enforcement means business as usual, then I am against it," Koch said. "We need a change."



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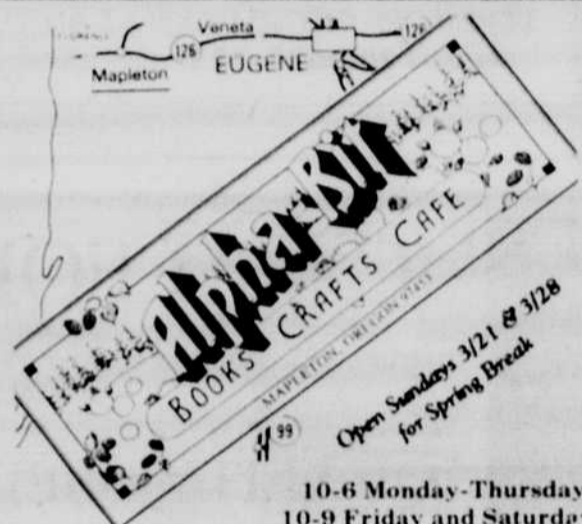
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