

John Day will suspend police department Oct. 31

By BENNETT HALL
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — The John Day Police Department will cease to exist by the end of the month — even though the city has yet to work out an agreement with Grant County to provide law enforcement services through the sheriff’s office.

The city council voted on Tuesday, Oct. 12, to suspend the department’s activities at midnight Oct. 31 in the face of an insurmountable budget shortfall. The vote was unanimous, with Councilor Gregg Haberly absent.

The decision came in the wake of a failed ballot measure last summer that would have raised enough money to fund the department for the next five years. The proposed local option levy actually attracted more yes votes (284) than no votes (169). But the Aug. 17 special election required a double majority for the levy to pass — a majority of votes cast plus a majority of registered voters casting ballots — and a low turnout doomed the measure.

The council referred the measure to the voters after determining that the city did not have enough money to continue funding police services and still balance its budget.

“This is a sad day,” City Manager Nick Green told the council at the Oct. 12 meeting. “We fought and fought and fought and we tried and tried and tried, but with the budget the way it is, we just can’t sustain operations.”

City officials had hoped to keep the department going at least until the end of the year while they pursued a three-year grant from the Department of



Steven Mitchell/Blue Mountain Eagle, File

A sign in John Day supports voting to approve a five-year levy to fund the John Day Police Department. The Aug. 17 ballot measure, which required a double majority, failed due to low turnout even though it got more yes votes than no votes.

Homeland Security that would provide partial funding for law enforcement services in the city limits. But the grant decision has been delayed, Green said, forcing the city to move up the timetable for halting law enforcement operations even though it’s still in the running for the federal funds.

“There’s a lot of uncertainty around that,” he said. “That’s the reason I’m using the term ‘suspend’ instead of ‘dissolve’ or ‘disband.’”

The department was already down to about half strength, with just two full-time officers and no chief after Chief Mike Durr retired earlier this year.

The department’s two remaining full-time employees, Sgt. Scott Moore and Officer Travis Piercy, will transition into new jobs with the Public Works Department.

Moore, who attended the meeting, said he and Piercy had been working long hours to patrol the city but couldn’t keep up that pace indefinitely.

“It’s just reality right now,” he said. “With just

the two of us, it’s just not feasible. It’s just not safe.”

Several councilors expressed dismay that the city could no longer keep the department running.

Heather Rookstool said she didn’t want to suspend the police department but didn’t see any alternative. With such a small force, she said, officer safety is compromised.

“I hate this, but with only two (officers), I don’t see this as something we can do,” she said. “I don’t want to be the reason for something bad happening to one of them.”

Grant County Sheriff Todd McKinley also was in the audience at the meeting. He said suspending the police department now would place a heavy burden on his deputies, who would have to take on added patrol duties.

“I understand the spot you’re in, but you’re also putting us in a spot because you’re going to put us down four officers as soon as you do this,” he told the council. “I look at my people and it’s going to saddle them with a nightmare.”

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