

Talks on police funding get going in Grant County

Sheriff covers John Day with no budget for more staff

By BENNETT HALL
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — After a two-month stalemate, discussions have finally begun between city and county officials about how to fill the void left by the shut-down of the John Day Police Department in mid-October.

A day after the city council's Oct. 12 vote to suspend operations of the financially strapped police department, City Manager Nick Green went to a session of the Grant County Court to propose a fund exchange: The city would give the county \$300,000 a year from its general fund for law enforcement services if the county would give the city an equal amount from its road fund for street improvements in John Day.

To date, there has been no formal response from the county, while the Grant County Sheriff's Office



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.

bears the burden of policing John Day with no budget support to hire additional staff.

Meanwhile, the issue of law enforcement funding has continued to fester. It came up again at the Dec. 14 meeting of the city council, which must decide whether to accept a \$375,000 federal policing grant and reconstitute the

city's police force or, if the grant terms allow, pass the money on to the sheriff's office.

A number of councilors voiced their frustration with the county's silence on the fund exchange proposal, while Sheriff Todd McKinley urged both sides to come to the table and discuss how to pay for law enforcement services going



McKinley Haberly Palmer

forward. "I think these two bodies are going to have to solve it," McKinley told the council, "and that's what they were elected to do."

Shortly after the meeting, the sheriff reached out to the county's elected leadership.

"I sent an email to the commissioners and the judge and just said, 'Come on, guys, we've got to get moving on this,'" McKinley said.

Some city and county officials, it appears, were already thinking along the same lines.

The day after the Dec. 14 council meeting, County Commissioner Sam Palmer had a conversation with Gregg Haberly, a city councilor.

"(Haberly) said, 'Look, we've got to do something,'" Palmer recalled.

That got the ball rolling. At Palmer's request,

McKinley put together a preliminary funding plan to provide law enforcement services to the city of John Day in addition to patrolling the rest of Grant

County — a 4,500-square-mile area that the sheriff's office covers with just four patrol deputies.

McKinley declined to disclose precise dollar figures until the plan has been reviewed by the county's attorney, but he said the proposal involves the city transferring the federal policing grant and providing enough additional money to hire three more deputies and one clerical worker.

"Those three deputies would be enough to cover what needs covered," he said.

While the discussions are still in their infancy, Palmer said he expects to have a number of meetings with Haberly, McKinley and possibly a few other people in an attempt to come up with a proposal for law enforcement funding that both city

and county leaders could accept.

However, he said, the plan isn't likely to involve the sort of fund exchange Green proposed.

"The policing and roads that Nick asked for are two different things, and we're going to keep them two different things," Palmer said.

Asked why he and Haberly took it upon themselves to initiate talks on the law enforcement funding issue, Palmer said they felt a responsibility to the community.

"Gregg and I grew up together," he said. "We want to see our town do better."

McKinley said he's just looking for a solution that will enable him and his deputies to do their job the way it should be done.

"I'm hoping to get the staff to be able to adequately cover the city and make the city feel they are adequately covered," McKinley said.

"And I want to keep crime down," he added. "If we aren't out there, something will fill the void."



April Ehrlich/Video image courtesy of the Oregon Legislature

A Senate committee meets on April 27, 2021, to discuss House Bill 2560. The new law requires governing bodies to provide a way for people to access most public meetings remotely.

Oregonians get remote access to public meetings, permanently

By APRIL EHRLICH
Oregon Public Broadcasting

SALEM — What was once a solution during the pandemic — allowing people to participate in public meetings remotely to accommodate COVID-19 health guidelines — is now state law.

House Bill 2560, passed by the Oregon Legislature in the 2021 session, took effect on Jan. 1. It requires governing bodies to make most public meetings remotely accessible when it's "reasonably possible."

At the start of the pandemic, governing agencies across Oregon — from small city commissions to statewide legislative committees — transitioned to hosting public meetings remotely, or at least providing a way for people to view and participate in meetings from home.

That could change as soon as social distancing requirements lift, according to one of the bill's sponsors, Sen. Elizabeth Steiner Hay-

ward, D-Portland. During a Senate committee meeting in April, Hayward said some governing bodies in Oregon were planning to go back to holding in-person meetings at which people can only testify in person.

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Oregon is among the

largest states in the country in square mileage, ranking ninth between Colorado and Wyoming. That makes for some long drives for people wanting to testify in Salem on statewide rules and legislation. Some have even organized community-wide bus trips to share perspectives from Oregon's farthest corners.

Even local meetings in Oregon's large counties can be too distant for some people to attend. Driving from Reedsport to Douglas County's commission meetings in Roseburg, for instance, takes well over an hour.

The new law applies to most public meetings held by governing bodies, except for executive sessions.

Members of the media already have access to most executive sessions, but HB 2560 doesn't specify if governing bodies must also provide remote access to the media for these meetings.

Applications sought for Western water, power maintenance projects

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press

SALEM — The Bureau of Reclamation — the federal agency responsible for the nation's water management — has opened the first application period for agencies and organizations to apply for funding under the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill Congress passed in November.

The first portion of funding can be used to rehabilitate canals, dams, levees and other facilities. The "extraordinary maintenance" projects can include aging water and power infrastructure, according to the Bureau.

"This month, Reclamation is taking direct action to keep our water and power infrastructure operating reliably into the 21st century," Reclamation Commissioner Camille Calimlim Touton said in a statement.

The Bureau is combining funding from the infrastructure bill with application require-



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press, File

Racquel Rancier, left, of the Oregon Water Resources Department takes a photo of a seepage hole inside Oregon's Big Creek Dam intake tunnel while Rep. David Gomberg, D-Central Coast, right, shines his flashlight on the vulnerable area during a 2019 tour. The federal application period is open for projects to restore aging dams, canals and other water infrastructure.

ments of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, which became law in December 2020.

The first application period for "extraordinary maintenance" projects will close Jan. 31. These applications will then be reviewed during the second and third quarters of fiscal year 2022 before money is awarded.

At least once each year, there will be additional opportunities to apply for

funding for those who miss the Jan. 31 deadline.

Touton said the Bureau plans to "be in lock step with local partners" throughout the application process and awarding of funds.

"Reclamation's relationship with our partners is one of our greatest strengths, and we're going to heavily leverage that partnership in putting this funding to work," said Touton.

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