

Columbia County Sheriff's Office Looks For Stable Funding

By April Bamburg

Three retirements and a resignation saved the Columbia County Sheriff's Office from moving forward with layoffs last month. Now, the county must secure stable funding for the agency, in order to avoid another crisis like the one recently averted.

Columbia County Commissioner Tony Hyde set out early this summer to create a task force of citizens, law enforcement and other stakeholders to explore funding options for the agency. He said on Aug. 12 that an announcement would come in the next week or so, identifying stakeholders. The next steps will be to craft a mission statement and begin gathering information on the various options.

Although tension may have existed between the commissioners and Sheriff Jeff Dickerson in the past months, Dickerson said that there is no animosity now.

"I never believed that they should do something they weren't prepared to do," Dickerson said. "They needed to make their case, [explain] why things would be the way it was. I owed it to the public to explain [my position] and did the best I could to represent the Columbia County Sheriff's Office."

The Commissioners' decision to put funding into the Sheriff's Office prevented layoffs, but Dickerson said that his agency is reeling from the budget cuts. He said that his agency will have to be more careful

about the times that deputies are on duty and where they work, where he puts people.

"There are two sergeants, and four deputies assigned to handle calls in Columbia County. Right now, one deputy is injured, so that leaves us with three deputies. We have an agreement with Rainier to put a deputy in the school district, which saved a job."

With one deputy stationed in the school, that leaves the department with two available deputies and two sergeants to take calls.

There is a possibility that deputies who currently have positions in Columbia County could leave, as they have put applications in elsewhere, according to Dickerson.

"The citizens are going to have to come up with a solution," Dickerson said. "We support the concept of a task force, but I have my own ideas about how this is going to be, and I will put [those] forth to the task force."

One idea is a taxing district to fund the patrol side of the Sheriff's Office. "A taxing district is the only way to provide an adequate public safety presence," Dickerson said. "Not to expand the city's roles outside their jurisdictions."

Dickerson said that funding of the administration of the sheriff's office, county-wide detectives, and jail funding and civil processes would continue to come from the county's general fund, but that the patrol

side of things would be funded through a taxing district for an enhanced patrol district.

Cities would pick up some of the costs, because they would benefit, as deputies would respond to calls for assistance if available, but citizens outside the incorporated cities would pay more than city residents, as they would benefit more from this option. Dickerson said that he was not ready to announce figures for either citizen group.

As part of this special district, Dickerson said he would push for sheriff's outposts in Vernonia and Clatskanie, with deputies assigned to both outposts, along with one clerical staff member. This would create, he said, "a true county presence."

Instead of commenting on any one option at this time, Hyde deferred to the task force.

The task force will "take a look at all of the options" to find a "sustainable funding option," Hyde said.

"Even in depressed economic times, people need a stable law enforcement presence," Dickerson said.

Negotiations with the Columbia County Board of Commissioners resulted in keeping five enforcement deputies slated for layoff and, through an agreement with the State of Oregon in which the state pays for law enforcement to patrol Sauvie Island, no layoffs were needed.

Mist-Birkenfeld RFPD Fights Wildland Fire

At approximately 2:45 PM on August 19, a passer-by stopped at the Mist-Birkenfeld Rural Fire Protection District Main Station to report a wildland fire on Flora Road. Upon arrival, fire-fighting crews found an area of about 3 acres to be involved with fire, which was quickly spreading up a steep hillside in brush and replanted trees. Responding Mist-Birkenfeld personnel set up a defensive attack, stopping the fire from spreading to a nearby home and limiting its spread into adjacent standing timber. According to Mist-Birkenfeld Fire Chief David Crawford, Oregon Department of Forestry personnel arrived along with mutual aid units from both Clatskanie and Vernonia, as well as units from John Day and Knappa in Clatsop County. Additionally, a Columbia County Wildland Taskforce was requested, including units from all fire districts in County. Two heavy dozers arrived to place effective fire trails quickly. Air support was requested and commenced operations late in the afternoon.

At 6:40 PM, the fire was 80% contained with fire lines within 50 yards of completion. Fire management transitioned into night operations under Unified Command. Highway 202 was closed to traffic due to air op-

erations. By 8:30 PM, the fire was under control and contained, and mop-up procedures were being used to widen the fire lines. Mop-up operations continued the following day using Oregon Department of Forestry personnel with fire district personnel supporting the efforts. At 3:30 PM, mop-up efforts continued, aided by cooler temperatures and higher overnight fuel moisture recovery.

"The quick response of all the responding units and districts played a big part in our ability to control the fire," said Crawford. Chief Crawford extended a big thank you to firefighters from Clatskanie and Knappa who covered overnight so the Mist-Birkenfeld volunteers could get some rest. "Everyone who responded was a hero," said Crawford.

Records indicate 27 fire district apparatus from both Columbia and Clatsop Counties and 10 Oregon Department of Forestry units responded to the fire. According to Chief Crawford, an estimated 170 people were on scene to assist. The burned-over area included about 20 acres. Loss due to fire damage to the growing crop of trees has not yet been determined by the land-owner, and the cause of the fire was under investigation.

they enjoyed the lake, the fishing and just boating on the water. It is wonderful to see folks like this enjoy our park. These people were a great bunch, and I think we should encourage more outings like this at the lake. This summer has been good for groups of old and young coming to enjoy our area. Gail Snethen
Vernonia

WOEC Annual Meeting Report

The West Oregon Electric Co-operative Annual Meeting was held on Saturday, August 22, in Vernonia.

At the meeting, election results for the Board of Directors were announced. In District #1, eighteen-year incumbent Bernard Bird was defeated 222-154 and will be replaced by Brian Baker. In District #4, Joe Riley ran unopposed and was re-elected. In District #6, incumbent Dixie London retained her seat, defeating Jonelle Stroup 218-141.

Board President Robert VanNatta ran the meeting and stated that the Co-op has taken on a number of projects that the Board hopes will increase reliability.

Darlene McLeod gave a sobering financial report. After three straight years of difficult winter weather, including last winter's snowstorm, WOEC finances have been adversely affected. According to McLeod, the December 2008 snowstorm cost the co-op well over \$1.5 million. Overall, WOEC showed a loss of \$720,000 in 2008. The good news is that FEMA is expected to reimburse WOEC at about 75% of eligible storm expenses.

Operations Manager Steve Scott discussed progress of the undergrounding of the seventeen mile Timber-Elsie transmission line-- a major, \$6 million dollar project that the Co-op has undertaken, with the help of over \$2 million in FEMA funds. The project has been in the works for three years, and was finally started this spring, and is expected to be completed by the beginning of November. The project is a combination of directional boring and trenching. Scott stated that the weather has been very cooperative, allowing the project to progress on schedule and has encountered very few problems from the general public. "As far as I know, this is the largest project ever undertaken by the Co-op," said Scott. Scott also discussed an upcoming project that will replace one of the Vernonia substations with a new substation on high ground at

the pole yard.

General Manager Marc Farmer discussed WOEC's response to the snowstorm last year, and how the storm allowed WOEC to identify and prioritize special trouble-spots along transmission lines. That information is leading to a ten-year plan that will attempt to underground approximately ten miles of line each year and increase reliability.

Farmer also announced that WOEC members should expect a 6% rate increase in October 2009. The increase is directly related to a rate increase of 6.25% from Bonneville Power Administration to WOEC and will be directly passed on to customers.

Farmer also discussed the proposed project to build a new headquarters and move the WOEC headquarters out of the flood-zone in Vernonia. Farmer stated that the Board of Directors has chosen not to move forward at this time on this project. Farmer discussed the pros of initiating the project now-- a need to move and protect Co-op assets; the current building is not seismically safe; the costs of repairing a building that was flooded in the past (about \$750,000 in 2007); current favorable construction costs and interest rates; and \$750,000 in available FEMA funds that will expire in December of 2011 if not used-- against the cons-- a poor economy; the expected upcoming 6% rate increase; the expense of other current projects; and the expenses the Co-op has incurred over the last winter events. Farmer stated that a new building would cost around \$3 per month per meter in rate increases. He also noted that in a survey done before the economic downturn, in which 12% of members responded, over 80% of members were in favor of moving forward with new construction. Farmer said that as the General Manager, he is in favor of building a new building, but the Board of Directors, which represents the membership, is against it, and that right now the project is on hold.

Readers Lend Their Voices continued from page 5

To the Editor-

This letter is in regards to a birthday party held at Vernonia Lake under the shelter near the Snack Shack. The folks that held the party were from Hillsboro, and had previously stopped by to get permission to hold this party here. They wanted to barbecue hamburgers so my husband Larry, who runs the Snack Shack, accommodated them. They could not say enough about how