

Sheriff Dickerson Searches For Stable Funding

By Scott Laird

Columbia County Sheriff Jeff Dickerson is looking for a solution to the problem of funding shortages his office continues to face, year after year. Dickerson was faced with a shrinking budget this past year, which included the loss of a major revenue source when the U.S. Marshals Office decided not to rent beds at the Columbia County Jail. He has made securing stable funding one of his top priorities this year and recently went looking for a successful model to copy.

"Over the last few years, our presence in the county has been shrinking," said Dickerson during a recent interview with *Vernonia's Voice*. "The cost of business is going up, the cost of employing individuals is going up. And the revenue available for the Sheriff's office is going down."

Dickerson recently traveled to Deschutes County, who hosted Columbia and Clackamas County officials for a seminar on how Deschutes has been able to secure stable funding for their Sheriff's office. "They are very proud over there in Deschutes County about the fact that they have achieved a moderate amount of tax fairness when it comes to delivering the services of the Sheriff's Office to the people who are actually paying the taxes for them. And I would be very proud if we could model that here in some way," said Dickerson.

The problem of funding the Sheriff's Office will be considered by a task force the County Commissioners are convening. Dickerson hopes to propose a model to that task force for Columbia County similar to what Deschutes has used successfully.

Dickerson is faced with a tough situation. Twice in recent years, Columbia County residents have rejected tax levies to fund additional Sheriff pa-

trols. "My approach, since I took office, is really to say, 'How can we do this in a manner that is fair to the taxpayer?'" said Dickerson.

"We recognize that times are tough, that taxes need to be just, and that citizens need to experience a benefit for the taxes they pay," says Dickerson, in explaining his tax fairness approach.

When the US Marshals reduced their use of Columbia County this past fiscal year, Dickerson was forced to cut patrol positions. Dickerson was hand-



Columbia County Sheriff Jeff Dickerson is looking for a fair and stable source of funding for his department.

cuffed, so to speak, in how to meet the needs of the county because the Sheriff is charged with numerous responsibilities that he is required to carry out. Those responsibilities include civil process serving, which they handle all around the county as well as in the incorporated city boundaries, and operation of the jail, which takes the largest bite from his budget. The enforcement arm, which includes the Columbia River and everywhere else in the county, was left to suffer.

"We're doing the best we can with the resources we have, but many times

there is no one to send when someone calls the Sheriff's office for help," Dickerson explains. "We want to give citizens the opportunity to enhance the public safety net where they live, in a way that is fair to every taxpayer."

According to Dickerson, the Oregon Constitution specifically establishes the sheriff as the primary conservator of the peace in the county. "The office of Sheriff is constitutionally established," says Dickerson. "State and Municipal law enforcement have been legislatively established.

Those police departments are part of a municipal desire to enhance what a Sheriff might be able to do. Police Departments have a narrow focus and jurisdiction-- usually about three to four square miles. The Sheriff, he's going to be spread thin because he's covering the whole county."

"People who live in the cities in our county live there for a reason," says Dickerson. "And one of those reasons is that the city provides Police Services. I don't think it's fair to penalize those citizens and ask them to pay for patrols for the unincorporated areas."

So Dickerson is searching for a way to provide what he is calling, "... stable, permanent and fair

funding," to run his agency. "We're going to have to raise revenues somehow if we are going to be able to fulfill our mission to conserve the peace across this county," he says.

His trip to Deschutes provided some ideas about how he might make that work. Dickerson explained that what Deschutes County has done is take a three-pronged approach to funding their sheriff's office.

First is the baseline support they were already receiving from the county from the general fund budget. In Deschutes, they have a guarantee that the current funding level will stay stable. In Columbia County, Dickerson currently receives \$3.8 million from the general fund, down from \$4.2 million last year. His total budget is higher because they earn revenues from operation of the jail, but they took a big hit when they lost the revenue from bed rentals which, according to Dickerson, was basically paying for his patrol officers. Dickerson wants to make sure he has a certain level of funds he can count on from the county general fund each year. "I believe our Board of Commissioners will make that commitment to our voters."

Next, Deschutes has divided their county into two tax districts, which makes up the second and third prongs of the approach.

One county district strictly funds all the functions of the Sheriff's office in the county that everyone benefits from-- things like the jail and administrative functions. Dickerson would propose adding some county detectives to assist in investigations and who would also help with drug enforcement, as well as an administrative outpost location in the north county area that would be available for things like fingerprinting services and concealed handgun licenses.

In Deschutes, they have a second tax district that only covers the unincorporated areas of the county. Dickerson would use this in Columbia County to fund enhanced patrols in the unincorporated areas. "What I like about this model is it promotes tax fairness," said Dickerson. Dickerson says he envisions an additional three resident deputies in the Nehalem Valley areas, six deputies stationed in north county and seven deputies stationed in south county for a total of sixteen deputies-- an additional ten on top of the currently funded six positions. "This would still not give us twenty-four seven coverage," says Dickerson. "But it would keep the criminals guessing, and it would make these deputies part of an area."

"This has been working tremendously well for Deschutes County," said Dickerson. "They had the foresight to get something like this in place when the economy was good, and now they are in good shape, even in a bad economy. They are the envy of many sheriffs in Oregon."

"I'm not a big tax guy," says Dickerson. "I'm more into government efficiency. I'm a fiscal conservative. I don't like to tax people to death. I just know that this is our only chance. We've depended on the US Marshals in the past, but we can't keep doing that."

Dickerson believes he has a plan that would be fair for all Columbia County taxpayers and meet the needs of the community. Or at least he has a place for the Commissioner's task force to start. But first it will have to be approved by Columbia County voters.

"I'm honored to be the Sheriff of this county," said Dickerson. "I want the citizens of this county to decide what they want for their Sheriff's office."

CC Rider

Nehalem Valley Fixed Route

Monday thru Friday		
Leaving From	Depart AM	Depart PM
Vernonia City Hall	6:15AM	4:30PM
Stub Stewart St. Park	6:35AM	4:50PM
Staley's Junction	6:42AM	4:57PM
Tri-Met's Willow Creek Station	7:15AM	5:30PM
Staley's Junction	7:48AM	6:00PM
Stub Stewart St. Park	7:55AM	6:10PM
Vernonia City Hall	8:10AM	6:25PM
(Arrival)		

General Public	\$4.80
Senior/Disabled/Student/Children	\$3.80
All Fares - One Way	

Monthly Passes

General Public	\$106.80
Senior/Disabled/Student/Children	\$ 91.80

Seniors 60 & Over Children Under 10

Also Available: West County Flex Route Service
Tues & Thurs Only Between Vernonia and St. Helens
See website for schedule and fares.

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Mobile Communication Device Laws to Change in Oregon

Do you talk on your cell phone or send text messages while driving? If you do, things are about to change.

Beginning on January 1, 2010, it will be a traffic violation in Oregon to use a cell phone, blackberry, or iPod while driving. This citation will carry a \$142 fine.

The Oregon legislature passed House Bill 2377, which makes it a Class D traffic violation for using any "mobile communication device" while driving, unless the device is used hands free. This is a primary offense, which means that police may stop drivers when this is the only violation observed.