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**voice**  
reflecting the spirit of our community

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# An Opinion: Why We Should Keep The Jail Open

By Scott Laird

Voters guides for the upcoming May 20 election have arrived and ballots should be showing up any day now. Voters in Columbia County have a few candidates to decide between. But they also have a big decision to make on whether to continue to operate the Columbia County Jail.

The Columbia County Board of Commissioners has said, in no uncertain terms, that the jail will close on June 30, 2014 if voters fail to pass Measure 5-238.

The Jail is managed by the Sheriff's Department and currently can house 110 inmates; twenty-five of those beds are reserved for local inmates. The rest are rented to the federal government which, according to the County Commissioners, helps subsidize the cost to incarcerate the locals. The County faces a budget shortfall, due to decreasing O&C Forest Payments, which the County has relied on in the past to fund jail operations. This past year the O&C funding was \$600,000 (down from \$2 million in 2008) and there is no O&C funding scheduled for 2015.

The levy calls for a \$0.5797 per \$1,000 of assessed value property tax for three years, which roughly equates to an increase of \$58 on a property valued at \$100,000 per year.

Columbia County voters have a history of rejecting tax levies to fund the Sheriff's Department. They failed to pass a levy to fund jail operations last year and have repeatedly spurned levies brought forward by Sheriff Jeff Dickerson to fund patrol deputies and other operations. The Sheriff's Department has continued to cut personnel; the closing of the jail would be another blow to Dickerson's administration.

So, how will you vote when your ballot arrives in the mail this month? Certainly asking voters to approve a measure to increase taxes is rarely popular for obvious reasons. Like all elections, these campaigns concerning public safety contain rhetoric from both sides, making it difficult for voters to understand the issue.

I have supported levies to fund public safety in our communities in the past. Here in Vernonia we are struggling with a decreasing population and a shortage of funding for our city and schools along with increasing utility rates. One way to combat those issues is to attract families, businesses, industry and tourists and increase our

tax base. A safe community is an attractive community. I think it's important, as Columbia County tries to grow, that those people we might want to attract know this is a safe place to live, work and play.

As we all know Vernonia is very isolated. We currently have a three man police force, which doesn't leave us fully covered, especially when an officer is on vacation or on medical leave. We currently receive little back up from the limited Sheriff's Deputies that are on duty. Several weeks ago we saw a minor crime wave as numerous burglaries occurred throughout the area. Of course it wasn't minor if you were one of the victims.

I have heard people say that we should just continue to underfund public safety and citizens should deal with these issues on their own by arming themselves and protecting their own property. Maybe I'm naïve, but to me that just sounds like a recipe for a tragedy. I imagine it will only be a matter of time before someone is mistakenly shot and maybe killed.

But I'm getting a little too far into supposition. Voting to fund or not fund the jail can be a complex and emotional issue.

If this levy fails and the jail closes the Sheriff has said that he will rent ten beds from Polk County and hold ten local prisoners at a time. That means fifteen of the current twenty-five locals the county is holding would be released.

On Sunday, April 27 I went online and looked at the current Inmate Population list at the Columbia County Jail. There were eighty-eight inmates incarcerated at that moment, twenty-five appeared to be non-federal prisoners.

Here is a list of the crimes those twenty-five were being held on, roughly in order from most severe to least.

- 1)MURDER
- 2)ATTEMPT MURDER
- 3)RAPE II, SEX ABUSE II
- 4)RAPE III
- 5)SODOMY II
- 6)SEX ABUSE 1 X3
- 7)ASSAULT II
- 8)ASSAULT III
- 9)ASSAULT IV X 3
- 10)ASSAULT IV
- 11)DUII
- 12)DELIVERY OF HEROIN
- 13)POSSESSION HEROIN
- 14)DELIVERY OF MARIJUANA W/1000 FT OF SCHOOL

- 15)VIOLATION OF RESTRAINING ORDER
- 16)HARASSMENT
- 17)VIOLATION OF RELEASE
- 18)HINDERING PROSECUTION
- 19)UNAUTHORIZED USE OF MOTOR VEHICLE
- 20)PAROLE VIOLATION
- 21)PAROLE VIOLATION
- 22)PAROLE VIOLATION
- 23)PAROLE VIOLATION
- 24)PROBATION VIOLATION
- 25)POST PRISON SUPV SANCTION

Now image having to choose which of those ten to hold; the first six or seven are fairly easy, but then it gets a little more difficult. On the County site, you can actually click on each prisoner and see more details about what each one of these prisoners is accused of. Number 16, being held for Harassment, was actually from Vernonia and also had charges of Disorderly Conduct and Criminal Trespass. Number 17 also had charges of Contempt of Court, Assault and Private Indecency. One of the inmates being held on a Parole Violation was charged with Reckless Driving, Criminal Mischief, Resisting Arrest and Private Indecency. Number 12 was not only charged with Delivery but also with Manufacture of Heroin as well as being a Felon in Possession of 2 Firearms. Number 10 who was being held on Assault, was also charged with Coercion and Menacing. Number 19 not only allegedly stole a car; he was also found with methamphetamine, gave false information to the police and is a fugitive from another state.

OK, let's say you have your list of top ten inmates to hold. After June 30 the Sheriff's Department will be citing and releasing criminals like the rest on this list. Imagine how it would feel to be one of the victims of these criminals, knowing they are going to be immediately released?

Now let's say a local police department brings in someone else charged with Assault I. Do you release one of your top ten or this new law breaker?

This is not conjecture or scare tactics. This is the reality of what the citizens of Columbia County will be exposed to on June 30 if the jail closes.

Voting for the jail levy is not an easy choice but it is your choice. You can vote no on Measure 5-238 to close the jail or vote yes to keep those prisoners in jail.

I know how I'll be voting.

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