

Public hearing shows mixed service district reaction

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IVN copy editor

The Board of Josephine County Commissioners voted to advance the proposed law enforcement service district to a second and final reading at their July 12 weekly business session, held at the Anne G. Basker Auditorium in Grants Pass.

While only two citizens spoke on the topic during requests and comments from citizens, the testimony perfectly encapsulated the spectrum of views the district proposal is facing as November approaches, when voters will decide its fate.

First to speak was meeting frequenter and former commissioner candidate Mark Jones, who represented the support a service district can find among the county’s citizenry.

“This law enforcement service district is a great start to providing a more permanent level of secured service,” Jones said. “It won’t be all that we need, but it’ll be what we need to help provide adequate security and some peace of mind to the citizens of this county.

“We need this district to pass, so I hope the citizens have become aware of the propaganda users, the ones spreading the ideas that the law enforcement district won’t help, the ones that’ll say it’s just a money grab. Citizens, beware. Please do your own real research and get the truth. And please stop relying on Facebook for answers.”

As if taking Jones’s warning against service district detractors as a challenge, meeting frequenter Bill Hunker’s opening line during his three minutes to speak was, “A countywide law enforcement taxing district is not the answer to our current public safety funding.”

Elaborating, Hunker went on, “It’s a semantic attempt to misinform the public that establishing a district means that we will have an adequate permanent funding source for public safety. There was no strategic financial needs assessment that determined the \$0.99 (per \$1,000 assessed property value) is the right amount to fund the sheriff’s requirements. But rather just a vain hope that that is the maximum amount the sheriff can convince the voters to approve.”

As he has done at past meetings, Hunker decried the fact that while the county jail has only housed an average of 135 inmates since it opened in 2000, the jail levy mandates funding for 185 beds.

“The sheriff needs to get this staffing problem cleared up before he tries to convince people that everything will be just fine if we only vote in this inadequate \$0.99 law enforcement district,” declared Hunker. He ended his remarks by urging residents to view the “running scorecard” the Oregon State Police Uniform Crime Reporting System has been keeping on Sheriff Dave Daniel’s performance as the county’s top law enforcement official.

When the time came for the commissioners to respond to public testimony, Commissioner Dan DeYoung started by explaining why the board is attaching a taxing rate of \$0.99 per \$1,000 to the district despite knowing this rate is “inadequate” in that it wouldn’t nearly fund law enforcement fully in the absence of future levies.

DeYoung argued, “If we were to say okay, what does a fully-staffed, fully-functioning jail, fully-functioning

detectives, fully-functioning DA - what is the whole thing going to cost? And set that out there and say, ‘Here’s your one shot citizens of Grants Pass and Josephine County.’ Here’s your one shot to fund it all: city, public safety, the fire department, everything that keeps you safe. You’re up around probably, and I’ll just take a wild guess at 7 or \$8 a thousand, do you think anybody’s going to check that box on the ballot? Absolutely not. So a lot of thought needs to go in. A lot of history. There’s a lot of history in this valley of what people will swallow and what they want. Some of them won’t even pick up the spoon at over a dollar.”

DeYoung used an example from the recent history of Grants Pass to illustrate how a small amount of taxes can make the difference between a funding stream being approved or shot down by voters, recalling how a proposal to increase the city’s public safety levy from \$1.79 to \$1.89 per thousand was rejecting by 60% of the voters, but later 70% of voters approved a renewal of the \$1.79 rate. “Go figure,” jested DeYoung.

“The 99 cents - we know darn well that’s not going to fully fund what we would like to see, the optimum, the very padlock of sheriff’s offices and law enforcement in this valley.

Lord knows we’ve got enough crime to fill 10 jails. But we don’t have 10 jails. We don’t have the staffing for 10 jails.”

The commissioner added, “Bill, you’re absolutely right. It is not going to give you everything, but we’re not promising you everything. . . We’ve already been to rock bottom and we’re trying to claw our way back out of this thing.”

Commissioner John West stated, “We really need an organized law enforcement to keep us going. How are we going to get businesses and people to come here to our county? It’s by keeping our sheriff funded. Is it easy? I’m not going to sit up here and say it’s easy but we just got to do the best we can. But the citizens are going to decide that.”

Board Chair Herman Baertschiger added, “I cannot predict the future. I don’t know what it’s gonna cost to run the jail in 10 years or 20 years. . . If I was 100% on on predicting the future, I would not be here. I’d have an office on Wall Street.”

The board chair went on to advise that with inflation continuing to rise, it is imperative for the county to get ahead of it and devise ways to keep law enforcement up and running.

Toward the end of the meeting, Baertschiger slammed Grants Pass Mayor Sara

Bristol for going on “national public radio” and blaming the commissioners for the homeless crisis because they declined to declare a state of emergency in order to be eligible for state relief dollars “and that when she requested it we laughed at her.”

“We did not laugh at her,” Baertschiger said. “I wish she would review the tape. We asked her some good questions, like, ‘How is 260 people who do not want to be part of our society and live under our rules constitute an emergency?’ By declaring an emergency, you open the door for the suspension of our citizen civil rights. Most people don’t realize that; I do.

“We just went through it with our governor having two years of emergencies in Oregon over COVID in which the governor did not have to ask the legislature for appropriations or anything else. Declaring an emergency is a very serious thing. We never got an answer from the mayor, why 260 people meets the declaration of emergency.”

Right before adjourning the meeting, Baertschiger raised his voice and asserted, “To get up on national public radio and state that these three individuals laughed at her when she asked that is absolutely embarrassing for an elected official



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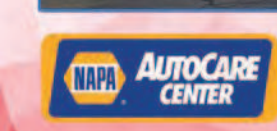




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