

CRIME, *Continued*

from page A1

“A lot of times, when we’re dealing with someone who has some mental health issues, we’re not able to get them help if they are impaired or intoxicated – we see this drive other criminalities like trespassing,” he said.

Kast said prior to SB1510, law enforcement officers were often able to intervene in these situations and effectively “use” a drug charge to direct the offender into the mental health system for treatment. Now, he said, they have to approach the problem from a different angle.

For Marion County, that means mental health teams going out into the community to “interact with folks in a different way.”

On the subject of homelessness, Kast was quite direct. He said homelessness is not a law enforcement issue, but it becomes one by default.

“The crisis usually starts with a mental health issue,” said Kast.

Kast, who estimated that 40% of the inmates in the Marion County Jail have an identified mental illness, said it’s a set of convoluted, well-ingrained problems facing law enforcement.

Gaston said his county’s percentage was likely higher, and estimated that 10% of the inmates in the Polk County Jail who have an identified mental illness are unable to conduct their own legal defense, and in some cases even speak or communicate with others clearly.

“A couple of decades ago we had some mental health institutions locally – Fairview, Hillcrest – and they shut down. At the time, there was talk about having the services provided by some other avenue, and that just hasn’t materialized. We wind up dealing with that situation through our jails especially, but also on



From left to right, Marion County Sheriff Joe Kast, District Attorney Paige Clarkson, Polk County District Attorney Aaron Felton, Salem Chamber of Commerce Vice President for Business Development Jeff Miller, and Marion County Commissioner Kevin Cameron were among the discussion participants.

Photo by CHARLES GLENN of the Keizertimes

the patrol side,” said Kast.

Much of what the sheriffs had to say was echoed by both county district attorneys.

“I’ve been a prosecutor for over 20 years,” said Marion County District Attorney Paige Clarkson. “The last few years have been the hardest in my professional career – I’ve never seen the criminal justice system struggle like we have over the last few years, and many of these problems are beyond our control, like the pandemic, but all of this has compressed the system like never before.”

Clarkson said social distancing rules and new regulations meant only two

courts in Marion County were fully-functional and able to hold jury trials during the pandemic, when they would usually have 13 available.

In describing the challenges and the public support for Measure 110, she gave equal weight to what she called Oregonian’s “confused compassion.”

“With Measure 110, we’ve seen the compassionate heart of Oregonians and our signature desire to help people become confused with a lack of accountability – you can be compassionate and still hold people accountable.”

Polk County District Attorney Aaron Felton described the mental health crisis

as “the defining issue” of his career, and he thinks one way tackle it is to make the courts more accessible to the public and more victim-friendly. He proposed to make procedural hearings and court activities public and put more cameras in courtrooms.

Jeff Miller, who emceed the event and is a board-officer the Salem chamber, said that while solutions aren’t easy to come by, the real value of these discussions is to get the county and law enforcement officials and the business leaders in the same room and on “the same page,” and plans to have further panels on the issue.

KeizerFEST: *‘Bill got his wish’*

Continued from page A1

The proposal has not been met with much resistance since it was suggested. Public Works Director Bill Lawyer notified the council in March that the chamber had already contracted work at the park in preparation for the event, including weed control and ground-flattening. He said the field adjacent to Chemawa Road would be the event location,

between the access road along dog park and up to the Big Toy site.

The Chamber’s plans for the KeizerFEST week of August 8-12 include a comedy show, a corn-hole tournament, a car show, a parade, a golf tournament and much more. A current schedule of events is available on the chamber’s website, keizerchamber.com.



Diners at a 2018 KeizerFEST event, to be held this year at Keizer Rapids Park.

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