

Jail bond: ‘There’s only so much you can ask the voters to carry’

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The jail bond has to compete with other bond measures on the November ballot. In Astoria, voters will be asked to approve a \$70 million bond for school improvements. In Warrenton, voters will weigh a \$38.5 million bond for a new master campus out of the tsunami inundation zone and a new middle school. In South County, voters will decide a \$20 million bond for the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District.

“The problem is governments, local governments, are always competing for revenue,” Marquis said.

The Warrenton City Commission, for example, has endorsed the city’s school bond but has taken no position on the jail measure.

“While I recognize the need for a new jail, I believe there’s only so much you can ask the voters to carry as far as a tax burden,” Warrenton Mayor Henry Balensifer said.

The main talking point in favor of the Warrenton school bond is the need to move the middle school out of tsunami danger. The new jail would also be situated outside the inundation zone.

“I have high doubts anybody would want to run to a jail full of inmates in a natural disaster,” Balensifer said.

Clatsop County Sheriff Tom Bergin, one of the leaders of the jail bond campaign, said the bond cluster has been the measure’s main detriment.

“The only thing that I tell them is that people have to make that decision as to what they want to support,” Bergin said. “It doesn’t matter if it’s one or two.”

Lodging tax

The county is also facing some blowback over its plan to offset potentially higher jail operating costs.

County commissioners passed a new lodging tax that will take effect in January. Under state law, 70 percent must be funneled into tourism promotion. But the rest — an estimated \$420,000 a year — would go toward the jail.



Sheriff Tom Bergin checks on the progress of a disruptive inmate at the jail last November.

Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian

The higher tax didn’t fly with some local hoteliers and tourism industry leaders.

“I know there was some consternation in communities because of that,” said Sheriff’s Office Chief Deputy Paul Williams at a Gearhart City Council meeting last week. “At that point in time, we thought it was critical before we send this out to the voters, that we have a solution in hand in regards to the operating side of the game.”

In addition to the tax, local hospitality leaders were also upset over the lack of discussion of how the revenue would benefit tourism, said Jason Brandt, CEO of the Oregon Restaurant & Lodging Association.

“That process has been incredibly frustrating to the hospitality industry in Clatsop County,” Brandt said. “They’re ready to vote aggres-

sively against the jail bond as a result.”

Employers such as hotels and motels account for roughly 7 percent of the county’s workforce, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Nonetheless, Bergin downplayed the tax’s chances of sinking the bond.

“A couple of those folks have actually been pretty nice about it,” the sheriff said. “They haven’t said ‘yes,’ and they haven’t said ‘no,’ but they said they’d take a look and consider it.”

‘Chicken or fish’

The bond measure comes at a time when mental health and substance abuse issues are top-of-mind across the country. Some have proposed that, instead of creating a new jail, the former youth correctional facility could become a treatment center.

Amy Baker, the executive director of Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare, said the organization has not considered whether the facility could feasibly become a treatment center. While capacity is an issue for residential programs locally, long-term treatment is more successful when people seek help as they go about their daily lives, she said.

“I think integration into the community is probably more important than sending them away and bringing them back,” Baker said. “The behavioral health system is never going to just fix people.”

Marquis said such ideas present a false “chicken or fish” choice.

“Wow, if we had an extra \$40 million, I think that would

be a great idea,” Marquis said. “If someone is charged with murder, do you really think that what you need to do is give them a bracelet and tell them that they need to go see a counselor? No. What about someone accused of rape or their fourth domestic assault?”

The new jail would allow for two additional nurses, including one psychiatric nurse, and safer, bigger spaces to isolate inmates experiencing a mental health crisis or detoxing.

“Our intent, then, is to get services in the jail to get them down the path of recovery,” Williams said. “Right now, they’re in and out so quick, we don’t even get the chance of getting the counselor in front of them before they’re out the door.”

Currently, the behavioral health agency provides telepsychiatry services to inmates. The agency has not spoken with the county about its role in a potential new jail, Baker said.

Overall, society needs to give more funding to mental health services rather than punitive measures, Baker said. But she supports the idea of having a safer jail space.

“I think the current jail space is inhumane to any of the folks going in there, but particularly to those with mental health issues,” Baker said.

She conceded that, because some are reluctant to seek long-term treatment, keeping more inmates in jail could also provide an opportunity.

“It is an opportunity to try to intervene with these folks, and the current space, the way it is, is just not conducive to that,” Baker said.

‘Very optimistic’

Balensifer said half the people he’s spoken to in Warrenton support the jail bond, while half raised concerns. Some are predictable — opposition to a tax increase — while others are more specific — not wanting inmates released nearby or in a developing area that has already experienced growing pains.

“There seems to be kind of a split within the community about whether they want it or not,” Balensifer said. “There’s probably 15 reasons people can come up with as far as their reticence to jump on the bandwagon.”

In the previous two jail bonds, 56 percent and 57 percent of voters rejected the idea. The vast majority of the county’s voting precincts opposed the bonds each time, save most of Seaside and Gearhart.

This year’s proposal will need a wider swath of support, and Bergin said he has largely had positive interactions with people about the jail.

“I see it going in an extremely positive direction,” the sheriff said. “I’m very optimistic.”

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