

# Push for Umatilla County jail improvements benefits county

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While this isn't always the case, when the topic of funding for jails and mental health facilities becomes an issue, what's good for Umatilla County is good for Wallowa County. It's no secret that the Umatilla County jail system is also utilized by none other than Wallowa County.

It isn't a matter of Wallowa County not having its own jail. It does. And recent statistics show that local crime rates are on par if not lower than state and national averages.

But since at least 2016 Wallowa County has made use of the Umatilla County Jail system. In 2016, we reported that Wallowa County Sheriff Steve Rogers indicated that the 12 cell jail in Wallowa County along with inadequate Human Resources required the use of Umatilla County's jail.

Simply put, it was more efficient for both parties if Wallowa County paid an annual fee for the Umatilla County Jail to open its doors to the needs of Wallowa County.

Republican Rep. Greg Smith out of Heppner plans to bring his deal-making magic to fund the Umatilla County Jail's \$1.6 million mental health remodel.

"That's my No. 1 priority," Smith said on Tuesday. And he's not alone.

Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock said a group comprised of Umatilla County, the city of Pendleton, Blue Mountain Community College and other local organizations is also pushing for jail renovation funding, in addition to BMCC's Blue Mountain Regional Training Center project, which is already featured in Gov. Kate Brown's budget proposal.

"Optimistic" is the



A newly arrived inmate sleeps in a Umatilla County Jail recreation room on Monday because no holding cells in the intake department are available.

Staff photo by Kathy Aney/East Oregonian

word," he said about the two projects' legislative prospects.

Interestingly, Smith represents District 57, and the Pendleton jail is in District 58, which Republican Greg Barreto of Cove represents. But Smith said the mental health needs in Umatilla and Morrow counties transcend boundaries and affect his district as well as others.

Smith, in his 20th year representing District 57 in the Oregon House. During the 2018 short legislative session he delivered on getting \$1 million from the Joint Ways and Means Committee's capital construction subcommittee for the Hermiton Chamber of Com-

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Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan

merce. The county jail in that go-round did not make the cut.

Smith said this session, he is working on lining up money from the right fund for the project. Mental health is a statewide issue, he said, and public safety personnel need the tools to deal with people in a crisis.

Umatilla County Sheriff Terry Rowan sees it that way. He has been pushing to revamp the jail to bet-

ter accommodate offenders who have mental illness. Last year he pitched the need for state funds to that capital construction subcommittee, but that did not pan out. He explained he had two days notice to testify before the subcommittee and understood he would get to speak for two or three minutes. He said he sent lawmakers information first, but when he arrived he found out he would get

to testify for two minutes total. He also went at it alone.

"Now I have a better understanding of it and I've been diligently talking to all our local legislators," Rowan said.

State Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, and Barreto also support the project. Smith said Rowan has taken the lead for why the renovation matters, and it shows.

"I think every police chief in the two counties has reached out to me as well," he said. "There's been (a) lot of collaboration over the last 12 months."

The county board of commissioners are keen on the plan, and so is the working group comprised of local

leaders.

A jail modification plan provided by Murdock details the county's \$1.6 million ask.

Originally completed in 1999, the jail has seen its average daily population rise from 135 inmates to 219.

Although the plan states that the county is seeing a benefit from jailing more people, the jail is also experiencing an increase in violent offenders and inmates dealing with mental health or substance abuse issues.

"As a jail facility, in addition to our primary duties of providing a safe and secure environment for staff and inmates, we are providing more and more social services to our inmates than ever before, such as mental health treatment, counseling, and drug and alcohol addiction programs," the plan states. "Many of these services we are not trained, equipped or funded to provide."

Attached to the report are photos showing inmates with special needs sleeping in the male and female recreation rooms.

The report states that the county would use the money increase capacity at its booking area to alleviate the bottleneck of inmates during intake and creating nine new cells for detox, medical, and holding purposes. All of this would be done within the jail's existing footprint.

With the session starting next week, Rowan said he plans to talk with some of the subcommittee members about the proposal and not just during testimony. Rowan is the vice president of the Oregon State Sheriff's Association, which holds an executive meeting each month. He said he aims to coordinate that with meeting with lawmakers.

*Wallowa County Chieftain editor Christian Ambrosion contributed to this report*

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