

Tribe supports proposed public safety levy

By Ron Karten

Smoke Signals staff writer

Polk County's possible effort to pass a public safety tax levy in the upcoming May election received unreserved Tribal support at a public hearing held in the Community Center on Thursday, Jan. 8.

The public hearing at Grand Ronde was one of nine scheduled throughout Polk County to gauge support before the Board of Commissioners make a final decision.

"Anything we can do," said Tribal Council Chair Reyn Leno on behalf of the Tribe. "We know firsthand the costs of operating these important public safety functions, and we are sensitive to the difficulties Polk County has in providing stable revenues for its law enforcement operations."

The proposed levy calls for a five-year tax limited to 45 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value. For a \$200,000 home, the levy would cost a homeowner an additional \$90 a year. For a \$150,000 house, the levy would cost \$67.50 a year.

"If someone comes to your house and kicks in your door you are already out \$90," Leno said. "In the past, criminals broke into homes when no one was around, but now they are going to homes when people are there."

"The Tribe has a financial commitment to the levy, and will be paying the safety levy on our fee land. It's well worth it."

In 2013, Polk County commissioners placed a four-year public safety levy of 60 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value on the ballot. It was defeated by voters 58 percent to 42 percent.

Three members of the Polk County Board of Commissioners – Chair Mike Ainsworth, and commissioners Craig Pope and Jennifer Wheeler – presented the county's case for the levy with the help of Sheriff Robert Wolfe, District Attorney Aaron Felton, Community Corrections Director Marty Silbernagel and Administrative Services Director Matt Hawkins.

County officials pointed to the loss of Oregon and California Railroad Revested Lands federal funding, which amounted to a \$2 million annual loss for the county. Timber



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno testifies on behalf of the Tribe in support of the proposed Polk County public safety levy during a public hearing held at the Tribal Community Center on Thursday, Jan. 8. The Polk County Board of Commissioners is considering placing a levy on the May ballot that would raise funds for public safety.



Polk County Sheriff Robert Wolfe speaks during a public hearing about a proposed public safety levy at the Tribal Community Center on Thursday, Jan. 8.

operations on 2.4 million acres of federal forest land had for years supported law enforcement, corrections, health and social service programs in Polk and 17 other western Oregon counties.



Tribal Council member Tonya Gleason-Shepek listens during a public hearing about a proposed Polk County public safety levy held at the Tribal Community Center on Thursday, Jan. 8. In the background are Tribal Council Secretary Toby McClary, left, and Tribal Council Chairman Reyn Leno.

From a funding high point in 1989, overharvesting and the effect of federal environmental legislation have "decimated" federal timber revenue for the county, said Hawkins, and pushed county budgets, like Polk's, to the breaking point.

In the 2008-09 fiscal year, federal forests helped support 113 public safety positions in Polk County. Today, the county has funds for 78.45 public safety full-time employees.

The county budget also has suffered from increasing health care and Public Employees Retirement System costs, slow increases in property taxes and a low permanent tax rate. At the same time, Polk County's population continues to grow with 76,000 people now living in the county.

As a result, 15 full-time patrol positions and 10 corrections positions have been eliminated, said Wolfe. Although the

Grand Ronde Tribal Police Department has taken over some of the Sheriff's Office's responsibilities in Grand Ronde, the sheriff is still responsible for local lands off the reservation, he said.

"(The levy) is not just good for the county," said Tribal Police Chief Al LaChance in a phone call before the meeting, "but the Tribal community will also benefit. It's good to know that they're here to back us up."

If the levy is placed on the ballot and is successful, Polk County's public safety sections would see an additional \$2.25 million in funding annually that will support 22 new positions.

New positions would translate into 12 new patrol officers and five more jail guards for the Sheriff's Office. These new positions would decrease overtime hours currently being logged and increase the efficiency of operations, Wolfe said. They also would provide court security to judges and courtrooms, which is currently absent.

The District Attorney would gain five more positions, including three assistant district attorneys and two support staff. Levy funding also would enable Polk County to contract with Yamhill County for two additional youth offender beds.

Decreased patrols under the current budget have resulted in a 47 percent drop in drunken driving arrests and a 54 percent drop in drug arrests, Wolfe said.

"Tribal support is an opportunity to build relationships with Polk County," said Tribal Council member Tonya Gleason-Shepek. "It's also important in rural counties to have the public safety support of neighboring communities."

As a Polk County resident and homeowner who votes, Tribal Council Secretary Toby McClary said he supports law enforcement coverage.

"I feel law enforcement coverage is good for the county," he said. "Although the levy will impact my taxes, I realize the negative consequences for our community without the funds."

Near unanimous support from those in attendance did not hide the concern that apathy might be the levy's biggest enemy.

"The turnout has been really small," said Pope, referring to this and three previous public hearings. "The apathy is overwhelming." ■

West Valley district seeking Fire Explorers

The West Valley Fire District, which covers Grand Ronde, Willamina and Sheridan, is seeking youths for its Fire Explorer Program.

Young men and women age 14 to 20 will become familiar with career opportunities in the fire service through classroom instruction, hands-on training and volunteer work. The program encourages and promotes accountability, safety, communication, teamwork, fitness and leadership.

Participants must attend weekly drills from 9 to 11:30 a.m. Saturdays, adhere to dress and conduct codes, perform weekly physical fitness and training specific to firefighting skills, and demonstrate a willingness to make improvements and show self-motivation.

For more information, contact Fire Explorer Post 908 adviser Seth Bellarts at 503-437-2046. ■

**Save the Date: Grand Ronde F.E.A.S.T.
Saturday, Feb. 21 – 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Grand Ronde Community Center**

Let's talk about food!

F.E.A.S.T. is a community organizing event focused on learning about local food efforts and creating opportunities for action.

All community members are welcome. A meal will be provided. **Please R.S.V.P. to Francene Ambrose at 503-879-3663 or fambrose@marionpolkfoodshare.org All R.S.V.P.s will be entered into a raffle for a new crock pot!**

