

**DUNES CITY from page 6A**

"My thought on the topic is, a small percentage of [fines] is better than 100 percent of nothing," Forsythe said. "And what happens is, it puts teeth into our ordinances."

Crime was a big concern to those at Darling's. There were multiple comments about the inability to get a proper police response.

"This summer, there was some creepy guy that was on (my friend's) property," one person said. "They had to wait an hour and 45 minutes to get someone from Eugene."

The reasons for this lie in the fact that the sheriff's office only provides, on average, three-and-a-half deputies on a shift, 24/7.

"We've looked across the country, and unless you go to third world countries, you don't find communities less policed than rural Lane County. It's just astounding," Lane County Sheriff Byron Trapp said in April during a Dunes City town hall with the Lane County Sheriff's Office, the Florence Police Department and Oregon State Troopers. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the issues regarding rural enforcement.

To contract a deputy from the county to patrol the city would cost \$180,000 a year, and that would not be with full coverage — that one deputy would need time off, as well as trips

to Eugene. More deputies would cost \$150,000 a piece. To get that, the city would most likely have to raise taxes.

The "judge" measure would not go as far as ensuring 24-hour police protection, but it would create a legal background for city violations.

But at Darling's, the usefulness of such ordinances seemed out of reach. While one person stated that they could see a need for it, others weren't so sure.

"What fines? I can go out, pop off 20 rounds with my gun, and nobody will come up and do something about it. You got some crazy people, but nobody shows up. Come on."

Another person stated that they had history with city fines, and the experience was lacking.

"That's not how we were approached," they said. "They told us we had to pay it or there would be ramifications. I mean, they threatened us, with a lawyer or whatever they were going to do. It was unpleasant. We paid up, but I have no use for them now."

That fight led them to have little to do with the city over the next years. And so far, they haven't noticed a difference.

"I don't have a big 'jump for joy' as far as Dunes City. Is it even incorporated? What's the benefit of having us being Dunes City, instead of just being a county? In reality, we're county. I don't

really know what Dunes City does for us. I don't see the benefit."

**Measure: 20-295: Five-year local option tax for city operations. Question: Shall Dunes City impose \$1,215.70 each year for five years for operations beginning in 2019-2020? This measure may increase property taxes to increase more than three percent.**

Due to a combination of a decade-old oversight and changing state regulations, Dunes City could stand to lose anywhere from \$70,000 to \$100,000 annually if 20-295 does not pass.

The reason goes back to 2007, according to Mills. Before that, the state allowed all cities to collect shared tax revenue from cigarette, liquor, gas and other taxes, with no strings attached.

But in 2007, the rules changed, Mills said. Only cities that had property taxes could collect the shared funds. Since Dunes City never had any property taxes, it should have been cut off from the funding.

Except it wasn't.

"There were differences of opinion on the future direction of the city," Mills told the Siuslaw News in June on why the rule changed was missed.

Mills stated that 11 years ago, Dunes City was in a "brutal time" that led to several city councilors quitting, as well as much of the city staff.

Running on volunteers, the city was

treading water. The state rule change went unnoticed by Dunes City. The state didn't notice either, so for the past decade, the city has continued to collect the shared revenue.

The city does not know why it wasn't noticed, either by the state or by the city.

"Not even our auditors saw it, and they do our books," Mills said. "We've just been flying under the radar screen because we've been receiving those funds, but we do not assess the tax. So that's a violation."

A violation that could cost them the entire \$100,000 a year. The fix to the problem? Impose a property tax.

Dunes City's suggested solution is to create a \$.005 tax on property value.

The city believes that the total revenue collected from all of the city's residents would be around \$1,216.

"We don't really want to assess a tax," Mills said. "We needed a very, very minimal tax just so we can say, 'Yes, we assess a property tax, so give us the money our people pay you already.'"

And how much will residents end up paying annually? For a home that is worth \$200,000, the homeowner will end up paying the city \$1 annually.

Over the five years, the city plans to take in \$6,078.50 from residents.

While the measure states that it "may cause property taxes to increase more than three percent," it won't. The

"three percent" language was legally required for the measure.

As was pointed out by city councilors, there is always a danger of "creeping taxes." It may start off at half a penny, but future city councils could push to increase the amount.

The solution staff came up with was to make this "tax" an option levy that expires in five years. The rate can't be raised within those five years, and after the levy runs out, the city and the voters reevaluate.

It's unknown if the city will have to pay back the taxes it has collected in violation over the years.

"We are publishing everything, we're not being shy about it," Mills said. "I suppose they will let us know, but I'm sure they're responsible for also overseeing that we're doing it correctly."

However, it is known that just the \$100,000 annual cut from the city budget would be deep, possibly crippling the city.

"We've been a bedroom community for a long time, but the growing pains are getting evident," Dunes City Councilor Duke Wells said in June. "I don't like larger government, but at the same time you have to have livability. There are more and more people living in Dunes City. It's not the same place that it was."

But for those at Darling's restaurant, Dunes City seemed to be the same place it always was.

There were no objections to the amount of the levy, though there were fears of an incremental rate creep.

"It's \$1 for that one, then \$10 for the next, then up and up," one person said.

When told that Dunes City will keep the rate steady, they didn't believe it.

"Until the next time they decide it's not enough," they answered. "That's what governments do."

And for the person who had grown weary of the city after arguments over fines, the idea of funding a city had lost its luster.

"What does Dunes City do for the citizens? The county does most of this. I mean, they want tax revenue for something we're not already getting, what is that going to help?"

Road repair was a problem that many at Darling's brought up. Getting help in fixing roads was a major issue.

"Our road is private, but depending on who you talk to, it's not private. The county won't have anything to do with problems on the road. City goes, 'That's not our street.' County goes, 'That's not our street.' I don't know."

When asked if they had spoken to the city about their issues, they replied, "Not really, I don't think I want to get involved with it. I don't see any plus. But I love it here."

Another person stated that they didn't know much about Dunes City at all, even though they had lived here all their life. In fact, they thought the city was only recently incorporated,

not knowing it was an actual city since 1963.

"I went to school in Florence, so I know more about Florence than I do Dunes City. I live in the Dunes City area, but I always go to Florence. That's the town I know."

They felt Dunes was more of a suburb of Florence, bereft of any distinguishing commercial features like a Historic Old Town or downtown district.

"No stores," they said. "You wouldn't go shopping in Dunes City. You have to go to Florence to get everything. I've always known Dunes City to be Florence."

Would the citizens of Dunes invest in infrastructure that would make a defining commercial district?

"People would never vote for more things in this city, with the taxes, if they try and make themselves like a real city," another person said. "It would cost thousands of dollars a person. I wouldn't invest in that."

All who were spoken to enjoyed living in the city, and none expressed a need to move away. But regarding the question of whether or not Dunes City ought to be a city, the Darling's Monday night restaurant crowd seemed to think that just being an unincorporated entity of the county wouldn't be all that different from what it is now.

Councilors contend that the city does make a difference.

City staff attends to local complaints, acting as arbiter in many local conflicts. The city holds charity functions, protects the area from state overreach and, above all else, makes laws, which is the one thing that county rule could not offer.

In a 2017, Councilor Tom Mallen talked about the idea of being a city. It was just after the ban on future commercial grows had been passed.

"... Dunes City is obviously expressing an opinion that they don't want marijuana here," he said, summing up the various and often tense debates regarding the issue. "So, it would seem, just from all this hullabaloo that we've been through, that Dunes City really wants to be a city."

It is because Dunes City exists that local residents can debate an issue like marijuana, the council believes.

If the area was simply county ruled, commercial grows would be allowed, per existing laws. No debate on the issue would be had.

The council fears that by abolishing Dunes City, residents would lose their independence, with all rules being decided by the majority in places like Eugene. And those who live there have different lifestyles and values than those in Dunes City.

It's the power to debate these issues locally, and act on its decisions locally, that makes Dunes City special.

But is that enough to make a city? The answer to that will be discovered on election day.

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