

Taxes: County rate among lowest in state

Continued from Page 1A
In other words, it has very little to do with how much the county is collecting in taxes for its general fund, which pays the majority of operation costs for the sheriff's office patrol and jail divisions, district attorney's office, treasurer's office, assessor's office, clerk's office and community development department, among others.

Only about 14 percent of taxes collected in Polk County goes to county government based on a \$1.72 permanent tax rate and an additional 54 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value going to the county road bond, which will expire after next year. The rest mostly goes to cities and schools. As a comparison, education — local school districts including temporary bonds and levies, education service districts and community college districts — accounts for about 49 percent of property taxes, Schmidt said.

"When you look at just the permanent rate for the counties, we are (12th) lowest," Schmidt said of county government.

How did Polk County end up on the low end of the tax rate scale? The short answer is more money

How Polk County Compares With Other Counties		
County	Permanent Rate*	Operating Levy*
Linn	\$1.27	\$2.83
Lane	\$1.28	55 cents
Tillamook	\$1.50	3 cents
Polk	\$1.72	45 cents (proposed)
Benton	\$2.20	90 cents
Yamhill	\$2.58	NA
Lincoln	\$2.85	11 cents
Clackamas	\$2.98	25 cents
Marion	\$3.03	NA

*Rates are based on dollars per \$1,000 of assessed value on properties. Rates are rounded to the closest penny.
Source: Polk County

wasn't needed at the time. The permanent rate — the amount per \$1,000 of assessed value — was determined in 1997, based on the 1995 total property value within each taxing district — county, city, school district, water district, for example — divided into the amount of revenue levied in that district.

For Polk County, and 17 other counties in the state, the federal government was paying timber subsidies based on harvest levels — aka O&C money — which affect-

ed that rate. "We didn't need to levy as much money as we actually needed to operate because of O&C money," Schmidt said. "We've lost almost all of that and now we can't make it up."

Subject to a steady decline since 2007, those payments are now gone, leaving a hole in the county's budget.

Polk County Administrator Greg Hansen said, at the time when tax rates were set, there was a belief the federal or state government would figure out a solution to the timber issue.

"I think there was a belief that the environmental regulations would ease up," Hansen said. "They only got worse. That hope was greater than it should have been."

To this point, Polk County has relied on budget cuts to make up the difference. Hansen said making more cuts to general fund departments outside the public safety departments isn't a viable option anymore. Staffing in general fund departments at its highest point was 138. Now there are 92 employees.

"Every (general fund) office we have, our FTE (full-time equivalent positions) are smaller than most counties this side of the moun-

"I think there was a belief that the environmental regulations would ease up. They only got worse."
— Greg Hansen on the loss of timber payments and the county's permanent tax rate



tains," Hansen said. With options for decreasing spending all but exhausted, what is left is increasing revenue.

The county realistically has two options: creating a public safety district that would charge its own permanent rate or a local option levy like the 45 cents per \$1,000 that will go before voters in May.

Creating a taxing district for public safety has been done just twice, both in Deschutes County, and it would require a countywide vote to create a new permanent tax.

However, Hansen said there is a major roadblock to passing a taxing district. If the county were to receive the extra money to pay for public safety, it wouldn't need to levy its full permanent rate to operate the rest of its departments. A county can levy less than its permanent rate, but there would be no legal requirement to do so. With no guarantees to voters, Hansen said a taxing district would be a hard sell.

That's what makes short-term (three to five years) local option levies and longer-term bonds attractive for raising revenue, Schmidt said.

Polk County's proposal would bring the amount of taxes — permanent and law enforcement levy rates — to \$2.17 per \$1,000, still 15th lowest out of 36 counties based on current tax rates. Adding in the county's road bond, residents would pay \$2.71 per \$1,000 in 2015-16. The road bond expires in 2016.

County officials say the levy is the quickest and best option within its power to boost public safety.

"A federal legislative fix could occur, but Polk County isn't going to be the one that makes that happen," Hansen said.



JOLENE GUZMAN/Itemizer-Observer
Members of a planting crew place native plants in the ground last week as part of a restoration project on the Luckiamute State Natural Area near Buena Vista.

Restoration work continues at Luckiamute natural area

By Jolene Guzman
The Itemizer-Observer

BUENA VISTA — If you are not careful, you don't see them — tiny little twigs poking out of the mud left from a recent flood.

Those twigs — really native plants — are part of the ongoing restoration project at the Luckiamute State Natural Area near Buena Vista. The 925-acre state park in southeast Polk County is located near the confluence of the Willamette, Santiam and Luckiamute rivers and features wetlands, upland prairies and floodplain forest.

Because of its unique attributes, LSNA has been recognized as an Oregon Conservation Strategy "priority area," and Oregon State Parks established a master plan for the tract in 2009.

Restoration on about a third the tract has been going on for years, and will be for years to come. The project has received more than \$1.1 million from various sources, public and private, to be stretched out over a lengthy period of time.

"It's about a decade's worth of effort," said Kristen Larson, the Luckiamute Watershed Council coordinator. The council is undertaking

LSNA Funding

Luckiamute State Natural Area funding sources, 2010 through 2020:

- Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board: \$439,317.
- Meyer Memorial Trust: \$606,357.
- Bonneville Power Administration: \$100,000.
- Oregon Community Foundation: \$2,750.

Total: \$1,148,424.

the restoration work. This winter, the Luckiamute Watershed Council received a grant and began work on the third phase of restoration. To date, more than 509,000 native plant species — 30 varieties of shrubs and trees — have been planted on 316 acres of the LSNA.

Work doesn't end there. The tiny plants placed in the ground by crews last week will be monitored and through a "plant establishment" program, meaning crews will come back to the planting site, remove weeds and other invasive species that could choke out the natives and plant more, if necessary. The recently received grant for the work will pay for the upkeep for five years.

Previously, crews would replace invasive species with native plants and let them fend for themselves, Larson said. Often that resulted in the invasives growing back and killing the new plants.

"That is really important to have better success," she said of the five-year plant establishment work.

The benefit of planning restorations in the LSNA is that many places feature mature ecosystems.

"We look at what is working and try to mimic that," Larson said.

Planting last week was happening on a lesser-used portion of the LSNA, but a "car counter" installed at the main trailhead off of Buena Vista reveals the little-known park is seeing more visitors.

Larson said outreach events — such as the New Year's Day hikes — will continue to highlight the combination of ecosystems within the LSNA, particularly the floodplain forest now rare in the Willamette Valley. Additionally, the council hopes to add interpretative signs along the trails this spring or summer.

"After doing this work, it's nice to know people are noticing the changes and coming back," Larson said.

CASA: County program has grown significantly

Continued from Page 1A
That the girl was thinking about that at such a young age was devastating for Barnett.

"That hit me so hard. ... At that point I realized me as her CASA was her only lifeline," Barnett said.

"I was the only one she trusted."

More lifelines like Barnett are needed.

Under the direction of Katey Axtell, CASA's director, Polk County's program has grown dramatically in the last two years — Barnett, now assistant director, served as interim director in early 2013 when there were only nine CASAs. Now there are 47 CASAs available, but that's still far from its goal of having "a CASA for every child."

The program has been able to surpass a major milestone, though.

"Every new case has a CASA," Axtell said, adding the program is now assigning CASAs to older cases.

The program needs more than 30 additional volunteers to finish the job, Barnett said.

In March, CASA will begin a 10-week volunteer training session with hopes of making progress toward that goal. Barnett said volunteers don't need special qualifications to serve — just time and "a heart for a child."



Want to Help?

What: Polk County Court-Appointed Special Advocates orientation meeting.

When: March 6 at 5 p.m.

Where: Board of Commissioners conference room, Polk County Courthouse, 850 Main St., Dallas.

Of note: Becoming a volunteer CASA isn't the only way people can help the program. Office support, event planning help and board members also are needed. Volunteers must pass a background check and go through training regardless of their role.

For more information: 503-623-9268, ext. 1301.

"We've been blessed with some dynamic, dynamic people," he said.

CASAs report to the judge assigned to the case, but work with Department of Human Services, school districts, police, the child's par-

ents and other groups depending on the case, to assure the best outcome. Barnett said cases average approximately 10 hours per month and CASAs are limited to two cases, unless they sign a waiver.

It typically takes 18 months to resolve cases — meaning children are returned to their parents or adopted — which is why volunteers are asked to dedicate at least two years.

"There are times when we become the only adult in this child's life that maybe hasn't lied to them, abused them and neglected them," Barnett said. "We are always there for them."

Though it doesn't require special skills, volunteers should prepare themselves for ugly situations involving abuse.

"It really takes a special kind of person, because you see a lot of stuff," Axtell said.

Barnett often takes the more difficult cases, but said every horrible situation he's dealt with was worth seeing a healthy family reunited or a child adopted by a loving family in the end.

"The potential to help a child and maybe break the cycle of abuse ..." Barnett said. "If we can intervene and break that cycle, then maybe the next generation of that family won't go through this."

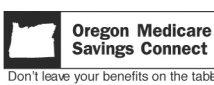
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Solution on Page 7A

4	5			3			
		1		4			
		3	8			6	4
		2		1	7		
8							9
		5	3		6		
6	1			7	9		
			3	4			
		9			8	2	

Sudoku
Difficulty: ★★★★★

4	3	2	8	1	6	7	5	9
5	6	9	7	4	8	1	2	3
1	7	8	9	5	2	4	6	3
3	4	7	2	8	5	6	9	1
2	1	6	7	4	9	3	8	5
9	8	5	1	6	3	2	7	4
7	9	1	4	3	8	5	2	6
8	5	3	6	2	1	7	4	9
6	2	4	5	9	7	1	3	8

Row →
Three-by-three square →

Column ↓

How to do Sudoku
Fill in the grid so the numbers 1 through 9 appear just once in every column, row, and three-by-three square. See example above.

The Christian Science Monitor

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