

# Attrition takes toll on John Day police

City down to two full-time officers

By Richard Hanners  
Blue Mountain Eagle

The John Day Police Department is now down to two full-time, fully certified officers.

The John Day City Council discussed issues presented in the city's 2017 Public Safety Review at its Feb. 27 meeting. City Manager Nick Green told the council he didn't know the answer to the financial problems facing the city's police and dispatch departments, but he had options to present and a likely outcome.

The \$572,106 in net expenses to the city for public safety — police, dispatch and fire — used up the entire property tax base in 2017 plus other revenue sources such as franchise fees, Green said.

An immediate problem facing the city is attrition in the police department. Officer Mike Durr left for a job in Baker City, Reserve Officer Larry Sherman retired last year and Sgt. Damon Rand submitted his resignation effective March 5.

"While natural attrition occurs in every public agency, it places increased strain on smaller departments that lack the resources and financial incentives to recruit experienced officers," the annual report states.

Green recommended in a memo to the council that the city decrease its police force from four-and-a-half full-time officers to three, but the recent attrition puts the department even below that recommendation.

Officer Andrew Martin graduated from the Police Academy on Jan. 9 and is still completing his field training. He currently serves halftime as a police officer and halftime as a dispatcher. Zack Carpenter, an employee at the Grant County Jail, has been sworn in as a reserve officer.

Until Martin completes his training, John Day will be left with only two certified police officers — Chief Richard Gray and Officer Scott Moore — along with two volunteer reserves.

Finding the money to bring the force back to its former level will be difficult, Green said. The unsustainable revenue levels should have been addressed 20 years ago, he said.

"Well, I think some of the numbers were a shock to me," Mayor Ron Lundbom said about the report.

Dispatch manager Valerie Maynard noted, when the city is down to two officers, that leaves about 59 percent of the hours of the day uncovered, a point that most residents were



John Day Police Chief Richard Gray

unaware of.

She also noted that "when you spread them that thin, you burn them out, you use them up." People are more important than that, she said.

The situation was not created by city staff, Lundbom responded — "It just happened."

Councilor Dave Holland noted that if the city doesn't hire a certified officer, "you're still in the same boat" because an uncertified officer can't respond to calls alone and needs to complete training.

Lundbom asked how late-night calls in Prairie City are covered when no officers are around.

John Day is the hub, Maynard said — this is where most of the incidents occur, and a police presence helps deter such incidents.

Looking for options, Green suggested that the Oregon State Police may be able to help John Day police cover the city's calls, adding that "we're not going to solve this tonight." He said he's been wrestling with the problem for two years and



Eagle file photo

John Day Police Department.

called the status quo "unsustainable."

Councilor Gregg Haberly expressed his concerns about drug crimes in the county. Oregon State Police Sgt. Tom Hutchison agreed but noted that drug crimes were not a "nine to five problem." A recent drug bust was just a "drop in the bucket," and the public needs to be made aware of the scope of the problem, he said.

According to the annual report, the Drug Enforcement Agency does not consider Grant County to be a high intensity drug trafficking area, with the result that the county lacks federal funding and resources to address criminal drug activity.

The attrition will likely impact contract services the department provided. Prairie City paid the department for police services, and the Grant County District Attorney's Office paid for victim assistance. With fewer person-hours, Green said the city may no longer be able to offer those contracts.

Haberly said he knew of people willing to donate hours for the police department. Undersheriff Zach Mobley, however, explained how much time was taken up by certified officers to train reserves in the sheriff's office. Anna Bass, with Oster Professional Group, pointed out that volunteer officers still incur costs to the city — for one thing, they need to be equipped.

Green noted that a public perception existed that John Day was "flush" with cash, but property values in the city are depressed the same as elsewhere in the county. The total assessed value in John Day increases on average only \$6,000 per year, he said.

The only solution is growth, Green told the council, to get back the 300 people the city lost in recent years. That is a long-term solution, however, and the city currently is facing a

short-term and mid-term problem, he said.

Following the Feb. 27 council meeting, Prairie City Mayor Jim Hamsher told the Eagle he'd like to see a police presence in town, but it's up to the city council to decide how much they can afford and how much coverage they want. Prairie City has contracted with the Grant County Sheriff's Office in the past, Hamsher said, but he needed information from John Day to present to his council.

"I hope they make a decision soon and not leave us hanging," Hamsher said.

In other council news:

- The council agreed to suspend work on the South Canyon Boulevard sidewalk project because of escalating costs.

- The city is still trying to gather survey results that could help qualify John Day for a Community Development Block Grant of about \$2 million toward a new wastewater treatment facility.

- The city is seeking applicants for the city council seat held by the late Donn Willey. An applicant will be appointed by the council on April 10 to fill the position for the remainder of the term ending Dec. 31, 2020. Applicants must reside within the incorporated city limits. For more information, call 541-575-0028.

## Former John Day electric co-op employee promoted

Blue Mountain Eagle

Oregon Trail Electric Co-operative has promoted Rick Jensen to manager of safety and loss control.

Jensen joined OTEC as a journeyman lineman 14 years ago, according to a press release. After working eight years in the La Grande district, Jensen worked two years in the John Day district. Jensen was promoted to reliability inspector in 2013 and, over the past four years, has worked in both the Baker and La Grande districts.



Rick Jensen

"I am excited to help advance our safety program. With the participation of all employees, we will continue building upon OTEC's commitment to safety," Jensen said.

As the manager of safety and loss control, Jensen will

oversee compliance with safety rules and procedures, including training requirements. Jensen will also ensure OTEC meets requirements for federal, state and local regulations and standards for safety and loss control involving.

Jensen, who is based in the La Grande district office, began his new role March 1.

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COUNTRY FINANCIAL

The City of John Day is seeking applicants for a vacant position on the John Day City Council under the provisions of Ordinance 82-29-01.

One applicant will be appointed by the City Council to fill Councilor Position #6 for the remainder of the term ending December 31, 2020. Persons wishing to apply for city council must reside within the incorporated city limits.

Applications may be picked up at City Hall (450 E. Main Street) during business hours, 8:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m., Monday - Friday. Applications are due to City Hall by close of business on March 30, 2018.

An appointment will be made during the regular session of the city council scheduled for April 10, 2018, 7PM at the John Day Fire Hall (316 S. Canyon Boulevard).

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