

Chamber president unhappy with new TRT proposal from John Day

New option would give John Day 6% and chamber 4% of room taxes collected in city

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

The city of John Day's third alternative plan for the transient room tax ordinance raised concerns from the Grant County Chamber of Commerce president.

The third proposal would raise the TRT rate, a tax charged on travelers at lodging facilities, to 10% for lodging establishments within the city limits of John Day. The current TRT rate for the county is 8%.

The three options would only apply to operators in the city of John Day and not to other cities in the county. The options previously presented were the city adding its own rate of up to 4% on top of the county's, or the city replacing the county's rate with its own 8% rate. The current county rate supports operations at the chamber.

In the new proposal, the 10% would be divided up into three parts: 4% dedicated to the city's Community Development Fund for tourism and tourism-related facilities; 4% remitted to the Grant County Chamber of Commerce to promote regional tourism; and 2% held in the city's general fund for general government operations.

The city's legal counsel is currently reviewing the proposals.



The Eagle/Rudy Diaz
Sherrie Rininger was installed as president for the Grant County Chamber of Commerce July 16.

"This is what we decided we would offer, and if it was declined, we decided that we would go after all of it," said Councilor Steve Schuette.

Grant County Chamber of Commerce President Sherrie Rininger said she is not sure how the chamber board feels about the proposal because they just saw it, but she said she is unhappy and feels like this will open the doors for other cities to do the same. She said she is under the impression that the city cannot override a county ordinance, which the new proposal would do.

"That is going to cause a can of worms, and that will make the chamber go away,"

Rininger said. "You got Prairie City spaces, Airbnb's and all these things all over the place, and if they start pulling theirs, we can't do our job."

John Day City Manager Nick Green said the city has been trying to communicate that its needs have not been met when it comes to tourism and tourism-related facilities.

Rininger asked Green when a city representative last came to the chamber for assistance.

"If you need signs for things, if you asked us, we'd be willing to do something like that," Rininger said.

Green said that's where he thinks the priorities are diverging between the chamber and the city with the city focusing on infrastructure investment on Main Street.

Rininger said the chamber has a \$20,000 line item in its budget set for projects like that this fiscal year.

Another work session will be scheduled between John Day, the chamber and hotel operators on a date to be determined.

"So we're going to attempt to compromise and find a negotiated agreement," Green said. "While no one is going to be super happy, we hope that we can achieve some mutually beneficial outcomes. I think part of this conversation is we need to decide what kind of community we are going to be and how we're going to invest in our mutual priorities, or we will have to go at it alone and that's not what the council wants to do."



Eagle file photo

The John Day City Council meets in July. Councilors opted against enacting a panhandling ordinance.

City opts against panhandling ordinance

Councilors cited the cost, lack of a problem and First Amendment protections

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

John Day city councilors decided not to draft an ordinance or resolution against panhandling after receiving a letter from business owners expressing concerns.

The letter signed by 15 business owners sent to the city council states they are concerned about a possible problem of panhandling facing John Day in the near future. They said they would like to see something put in place to prevent panhandling or begging on the streets of John Day.

"We feel that if we are proactive in this we can have something in place should it become an issue," the letter states.

A family recently panhandling on the intersection of highways 395 and 26 is what prompted business owners to bring their concern to the city.

"Etc. A Unique Boutique" business owner Sherry Rininger, who submitted the letter to the council, said the panhandling family fit the description of an all-points bulletin that went out shortly after they panhandled in John Day because they were scamming people in other cities as well.

"The people I spoke to ... don't want to see that in John Day," Rininger said in an interview with the Eagle. "Maybe it's not an issue now, but let's not let it become one."

Rininger said she would like to see the city establish

an ordinance or resolution so panhandlers avoid begging for money on the street corner and are directed to resources that can help them out.

"I'm all for helping these people that are legitimate, and we are a very generous community, but it's a shame to see people try to take advantage of that generosity," Rininger said.

Councilor Dave Holland expressed concerns with the plan because of the cost involved with ordinances and legal fees and the lack of the problem.

He said it would be a waste of money because John Day does not have the homeless population where panhandling typically occurs.

Councilor Elliot Sky brought up the legal challenges that cities have faced when attempting to deal with panhandling because the First Amendment protects Americans' right to free speech, which includes asking strangers for money. Another problem he had was with the idea of fines or punitive measures against those in poverty.

Councilor Shannon Adair suggested sending a letter to business owners from the city saying what can be legally done in this situation, information from John Day Police Department Chief Mike Durr on panhandling in the city and the process for an ordinance since this is an issue that business owners expressed concerns about.

"We can revisit it if it becomes an ongoing problem here. We can always write an ordinance in the future," Sky said. "I don't see the need to write an ordinance preventively because we can always revisit the topic."

Legislative leaders OK COVID-19 relief funds over objections of half of lawmakers

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

The Oregon Legislature's most powerful panel approved a plan to use federal funds to buy \$105 million of personal protective equipment, despite objections from over half of all lawmakers.

"I feel like I have been beat over the head on this issue over and over and over again," said Sen. President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, who presided over the of the Legislature's Emergency Board on Monday.

Courtney chaired the sometime tense one-hour meeting of the board, a panel of 20 legislative leaders and key lawmakers from both chambers and both parties that can make decisions while the Legislature is not in session.

The Emergency Board on Monday approved a plan to purchase \$105 million in equipment to distribute to counties and cities.

The approval came despite a letter signed by 47 of the Legislature's 90 lawmakers calling for the money to go directly

to local governments to spend on their COVID-19 priorities instead of having the agenda dictated by the state. Among those signing were at least 18 Democrats.

The letter said that the state has made only \$200 million available to local governments through a reimbursement program controlled by the state.

"By keeping a disproportionate amount of the funds, the state has created inadequate resource distribution with significant statewide inequities," the letter said.

The letter supports an earlier letter from a coalition of 17 civic groups, including the Oregon Business Alliance, Bend Chamber of Commerce, League of Oregon Cities and the Association of Oregon Counties.

Oregon received about \$1.63 billion in coronavirus relief funds. Under the federal directive, some local governments received their allocations directly — about \$247 million was sent to Portland, and to Washington and Multnomah counties.

Other local governments

were to receive \$625 million, with the federal directive saying the money should be allocated to local governments on a per capita basis.

Instead, the Legislature and Gov. Brown have controlled the process. About \$200 million was put into a state-run account in which local governments could apply for allocations.

"In short, they are getting short-changed," said Senate Minority Leader Fred Girod, R-Stayton, a member of the Emergency Board.

While the \$105 million expenditure was the official reason for the meeting, the underlying tension was over the opinion of many lawmakers that Gov. Kate Brown, House Speaker Tina Kotek, D-Portland, and Courtney were rushing spending through the process with little consultation with other lawmakers.

Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose, said that the Emergency Board was being "reduced to a rubber stamp for expenditures decided somewhere else" for deals hammered out before they

even came to the Emergency Board.

"We are pushing through items we spent a billion dollars on without any testimony or even time for thoughtful analysis," she said.

Most Republicans and some Democrats said the allocation of federal dollars so far seems tilted in favor of the Portland area.

Rep. Greg Smith, R-Hepner, said he respected the efforts of legislative leaders and wished that they had worked more "arm-in-arm" with local governments. While wishing there was a way to vote yes, Smith said he was receiving strong signals from his Eastern Oregon district that the process had been unfair to local governments east of the Cascades.

"I represent five counties, multiple, multiple cities," Smith said. "I am representing dozens and dozens of officials who have all expressed to me to vote no today."

Democrats who supported the allocation said the process was the best way to leverage state buying power to help local governments.

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