

County residents asked to vote on bonds

Four to choose from in November

By Jack Heffernan
The Daily Astorian

During a meeting earlier this month, Clatsop County Commissioner Sarah Nebeker argued that a November bond measure to relocate and expand the county jail needs to pass. But she recognized that voters may be leery of the tax burden.

"It's the cheapest bond out there, though," Sheriff Tom Bergin said.

Bergin was referring to three other bonds — for the Astoria and Warrenton school districts and the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District — that will be on the ballot. Local governments are trying to address several long-standing needs while the economy continues to boom, betting that voters will not have bond overload.

"The bond passage rate the last three to five years has really been on an upswing statewide," said Mark Jeffery, the superintendent of the Warrenton-Hammond School District. "It's pretty incredible for a county this size. And not just small projects."

Officials have not coordinated the timing of the bonds and say they do not feel a sense of competition. But the number of tax hikes has been a topic of slight concern.

"Obviously bond fatigue, I guess, is a concern, but I think that we started this over a year ago and we can't, you know, we don't have a crystal ball to know what other cities are going to do," said Scott Lee, the chairman of the county Board of Commissioners.

Lee and Bergin are correct. The county's efforts to move the 60-bed jail from Astoria to the shuttered North Coast Youth Correctional Facility in Warrenton began last spring. The \$20 million bond would be the least expensive in terms of its impact on property taxes — an estimated 21 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value. County and law enforcement leaders hope a new jail will solve persistent overcrowding.

Beyond the dollar figure,



COLIN MURPHEY PHOTOS/THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Max Price performs a trick at the skate park in the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District in Seaside. A bond to expand the recreation center will be on the ballot in November.

those involved in promoting the bonds will also need to rely on different voting demographics. The November election is expected to draw larger turnout than the May primary due to a number of local, state and congressional races.

"Voter turnout, I think, is the key to this bond," Lee said.

Turnout may be a positive for some bonds and a negative for others.

"I think there's always going to be a base of regular voters that are going to support the jail bond, and I think that it is problematic because typically younger people are suspicious, as I am, of the industrial prison system in America," Lee said. "I think it's important that the county, we work on messaging to reach out to that younger segment of voters that, you know, this isn't a problem of over-incarceration."

Should that message fall flat with younger voters, the county may need to rely on people who would not be directly affected by the rise in property taxes.

"I really want to see folks that don't own property and that haven't been here for a long time to get involved and register to vote," Lee said.

On the other hand, young voters may be pivotal to the \$20 million Sunset Empire bond to expand its Seaside recreation center — at 70 cents

per \$1,000. The recreation district hopes the new facility will generate additional revenue following a decrease last year.

Some have speculated that younger voters would be more likely to utilize the upgraded facility and, therefore, more willing to pay for it.

But, "I would hope that all of our residents — both young and old — can see the benefit of this," said Skyler Archibald, the executive director of the recreation district.

Seaside School District voters overwhelmingly passed a \$99.7 million bond in 2016 to relocate schools out of the tsunami inundation zone. Though it's for a different purpose, the recreation district hopes for similar support.

"I guess I'd be lying to say we weren't motivated by the voters' approval of the school bond," Archibald said.

While the entire county will vote on the jail bond, only voters within the recreation district will decide on the Sunset Empire plan. Although the bonds would come at an identical price, more taxpayers would share the burden of the new jail than the recreation facility.

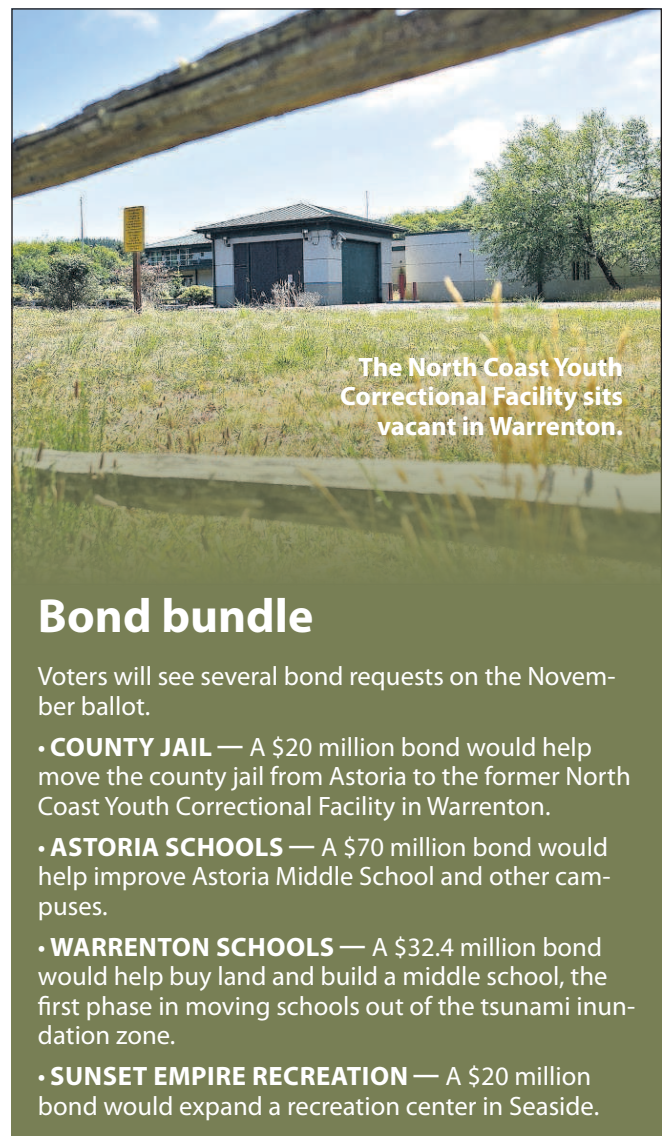
"The jail bond affects all of the county obviously, so it's not going to be as easy for us to market it," Archibald said. "We do have to be a little bit insightful with how we message it."

School bonds

Seaside-area voters will not, however, be asked to pitch in as much as those who live in the Warrenton-Hammond or Astoria school districts. The \$70 million Astoria bond to modernize the school district's five campuses would cost taxpayers \$2.83 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. Those in Warrenton-Hammond would need to pay \$2.49 per \$1,000 to buy a master campus and build a new middle school outside the tsunami inundation zone.

At a smaller price but with a similar goal of moving outside the tsunami zone, Warrenton-Hammond officials hope their \$32.4 million bond will have as much success as the 2016 one in Seaside. The school district did not specifically move forward with the bond because of the Seaside example, but it did compare the upcoming bond to the past one, Jeffery said.

In Astoria, the motivations are largely about timing. A bond from 2000 is set to expire, and the school district



The North Coast Youth Correctional Facility sits vacant in Warrenton.

Bond bundle

Voters will see several bond requests on the November ballot.

• **COUNTY JAIL** — A \$20 million bond would help move the county jail from Astoria to the former North Coast Youth Correctional Facility in Warrenton.

• **ASTORIA SCHOOLS** — A \$70 million bond would help improve Astoria Middle School and other campuses.

• **WARRENTON SCHOOLS** — A \$32.4 million bond would help buy land and build a middle school, the first phase in moving schools out of the tsunami inundation zone.

• **SUNSET EMPIRE RECREATION** — A \$20 million bond would expand a recreation center in Seaside.

hopes to modernize its campuses.

"We just want people to know what kind of shape our schools are in," Superintendent Craig Hoppes said. "It works best for us to go right now."

Voters in both school districts will also decide on the jail bond. While maintaining that the bonds are not competing, Bergin made a case for the relative importance of the new jail.

"If we don't have the security with the jail, what good are the other entities?" Bergin asked.

Necessary asks

With nagging infrastructure needs and a steady economy, officials who will be promot-

ing the bonds over the next few months believe the asks are necessary.

"There's a lot that needs to be done right now, and we have the opportunity to do that. The economy is rolling good right now. People are making money," Lee said. "This is an opportunity for the community to get some things done that we might not be able to do in 10 years or couldn't do 10 years ago."

But will voters choose one bond over another after doing the tax math?

"I think the voters are smarter than that and, kind of, can understand what's going on here," Lee said. "It's a coincidence, but I don't think it's a deal breaker to pass these."



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