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Irrigon looks at starting municipal court

However, move could affect city's sheriff coverage

By David Sykes

Irrigon is looking to set up its own municipal court and begin handling tickets and violations within the city, a move that would take fine money away from the Justice Court and the county budget. The proposal sparked a long discussion at a recent county commission meeting.

Commissioners talked about how the new city court would impact the county budget, and how the change could affect the county sheriff's police coverage contract with Irrigon. Morrow County Sheriff Ken Matlack was at the February 2 meeting and part of the discussion.

Matlack, who lives in Irrigon and sits on the city council, explained that if the city does set up a municipal court it would handle only tickets and code violations and no misdemeanors or felonies.

Irrigon currently contracts with the sheriff's office for police coverage and all tickets written by deputies within the city limits go to the county

justice court, and likewise the fines into the county budget. None of the ticket money goes to the city. This is the same for all cities in the county. Heppner has a contract with the county for police services and all tickets and fine money goes through justice court. Boardman has its own police force and all tickets and money also goes to the justice court. Lexington and Ione have no police force and do not contract with the county; however, the sheriff still provides limited police services, and again all tickets and money from those jurisdictions goes to the county.

At the February 2 meeting commissioners expressed concern the money taken away from justice court would have an impact on the county budget and could even reduce justice court and sheriff's office staff, therefore changing how policing is done in Irrigon.

One county commissioner believes Irrigon is starting the new court because it has done financial analysis and thinks it could make more money on ticket income than the cost of operating the new court. "I would think Irrigon did look at this because if they think if they hire a municipal judge and assistant and pay a combined \$150,000 and then they get ticket income at worst it will break even and at best it will make a little revenue for them," Commissioner Chair Don Russell said.



Justice Court offices in Irrigon

But Irrigon city officials say it's not about the money but more about accountability, oversight and supervision of the court. "That's what this is about," says Irrigon City Manager Aaron Palmquist. "We aren't going to tell the municipal court what to do, but we do think we should have some oversight," he said of the Irrigon City Council. He gave as an example how code enforcement is handled by the justice court, saying there sometimes is not enough accountability for violations. "We may want a municipal court to make violators more accountable."

As far as the cost of the court Palmquist says it will be nowhere near \$150,000 to operate. He says the city is looking at several options including contract judges to come in and hold court once or maybe twice a month. He says the city has \$59,000 budgeted for the court next year, and with an expected ticket revenue of \$20,000 income, the remaining \$39,000 would be made up from the general fund.

Planning for the new court has been in the works since last May when the city adopted an ordinance spelling out court functions and duties. The court will not handle misdemeanors or felonies and the judge is required to be a member of the Oregon State Bar and to have malpractice insurance.

The fiscal impact on the county budget of Irrigon starting its own court was discussed at length by the commissioners, but at the same time they talked about the county sheriff's police protection contract with the city. Irrigon currently pays the county \$95,000 per year for 40 hours of police protection per week. Palmquist says he has been in talks with the sheriff to provide next year's service at \$98,000. Matlack tied the city's decision to establish a municipal court

into the sheriff continuing to provide a police protection contract, in which he says Irrigon gets more than they pay for. "I don't think the board (commissioners) would go along with a contract where the county is getting paid for one position that equals 160 hours per month but in reality we give 450 to 650 hours every month," Matlack says. He told the commissioners

the city is paying for one position but, "They are getting three positions." He pointed out that if the city did not have a contract with the sheriff's office then all violations

will automatically go to the justice court. Matlack added that Irrigon has a lot of police work to do in the city. "I am on the city council and understand their issues. Because of their growth they take a lot of work on police services. I don't have an answer for that," he said. Palmquist disputes the sheriff's hours, saying many are attributed to Irrigon incorrectly and should not be counted as time spent in the city.

Boardman has their own 11-person police department including a chief, lieutenant, two sergeants, a detective, four officers, one school resource officer and an office manager. Russell says the Boardman department's budget is a "little over two million dollars." Boardman does not have a municipal court and all of their tickets and fines go to the justice court.

Heppner has had a contract to provide police with the county for many years. It started out years ago at three positions and 120 hours a week, but in recent years is two positions and 80 hours per week. Heppner City Manager Kraig

Cutsforth says Heppner will pay \$178,683 for its police contract this year. "The city also sets aside money for the purchase of vehicles at a rate of \$15,000 per year," he says. "We have been informed to expect the cost of the contract to raise at least three percent per year from this point forward." All the tickets and money from fines goes to the justice court.

Lexington and Ione do not have police contracts with the sheriff's office, but the office still provides police protection, however no city code enforcement is done by the sheriff's deputies.

Morrow County Council and District Attorney Justin Nelson said the Irrigon municipal court would take the money-making violations away from the justice court and leave the money costing violations behind. Nelson explained how traffic and other low-level violations are typically tickets that get paid. He said the new city court would handle only those type of offenses and not the more expensive misdemeanors and felonies. He said those higher-level crimes typically require court appointed lawyers, and on top of that the defendants don't normally have the money to pay fines that are levied against them. "They cost the county money," he told the commissioners.

Matlack said an argu-

Lori Roach resigns from Heppner Chamber



Lori Roach

Lori Roach, who began her new job as executive director of the Heppner Chamber on July 1, has decided to resign. Roach took over the position from Sheryll Bates when Bates retired.

Lori and her husband, Rick, moved to Heppner in

April 2020 from their most recent home in North Bonneville, WA, which is just across the river from the Bridge of the Gods. While living there, she and Rick operated Studio 6 Design-works where they published The Gorge Business News newspaper that is distributed from Lyle to Camas in Washington and from Troutdale to The Dalles in Oregon.

Lori and Rick intend to stay in Heppner where Lori will work as an independent business consultant.

Lori wrote the following letter to the residents of Heppner, Lexington and Ione:

Dear Heppner, Lexington and Ione,

I moved to Heppner in April 2020 at the very beginning of this pandemic we are all involved with, to become the executive director of the Heppner Chamber of Commerce. I came with high hopes that the chamber would be a perfect fit for me. I soon found out, that while there were a lot of great things about working at the chamber, it also came with some challenging aspects I did not expect. I started eight months ago and sadly my role as the executive director of the Heppner Chamber of Commerce has ended this week, two weeks after I tendered my resignation to my board of directors.

Times are tough and change can be hard. I don't think the job was quite what I had expected, and I don't think I was quite what my board had expected, so we will be parting ways. I believe I can better represent and help businesses throughout Morrow County and northeast Oregon as an independent, creative business consultant.

I want to say thank you to so many of you that welcomed me here with open arms. I have made some great friends along the way and recently bought a house with my husband Rick, so we do not plan on leaving any time soon.

I often joke that I have had so much fun since coming to town, because all I have done is give away money and Christmas presents. While that is partially true, it was the process of getting to know those of you who came into my office that I am most thankful for. Together we hammered out grant paperwork, or brainstormed about your business, or found joy in the great Christmas presents that were donated for the Heppner Christmas event. The friends I find along the way are always my biggest blessing, and if we happened to find each other here, please know that just because I am no longer at the chamber does not mean that I am done cheering you and your business on. Please feel free to call me for brainstorming sessions, help with grants, and 'hey you can do this' encouragement. My new email is lori.mcbn@gmail.com if you would like to contact me that way.

I want to thank my Heppner Chamber of Commerce board and my Willow Creek Valley Economic Development Group board for giving me the opportunity to meet so many wonderful people. My work in Morrow County is only just beginning, and I am so excited for the direction my journey is taking me. It has been great getting to know those of you I have gotten the chance to know. I appreciate your understanding of this personal decision and I look forward to working with all of you, for the betterment of our communities, over the coming years.

Sincerely,
Lori Roach

ment being heard around Irrigon now is the citizens of Irrigon pay county taxes which in part fund the sheriff's office. That money people contend should be counted as money paid to the sheriff for services. "The discussion is 'we don't want to pay more because we are already paying taxes.' Maybe they are paying more. I can't answer that," Matlack said.

Commissioners were told that with the property valuations within the Irrigon city limits those properties pay \$255,000 per year into the county. "Two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars isn't a lot for all county services," Russell pointed out. The sheriff's office is about 21 percent of the general fund county expenditures, and eight percent of the total overall yearly county budget.

-See IRRIGON/PAGE TWO

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