

Commissioners Report for Week of 2-7-23

Josephine County Commission Chair Herman Baertschiger has gotten bolder with his demands since John West replaced former Commissioner Darin Fowler. Baertschiger and West want people who file code violation complaints revealed to those they filed the complaint against. Baertschiger and West want department heads to “modernize” their advertising by using on-line sources instead of the newspaper. Baertschiger and West want the county Public Information Officer to filter everything department heads say to the media. Baertschiger and West want to monitor contracts department heads sign more closely.

Needless to say this got significant pushback from department heads this week...and Commissioner Dan DeYoung during Board workshops Feb. 7th and 9th. Department heads were clear that what the Commissioners decide they will accept “because you’re our bosses.” However, many said the Commission’s Order regarding legal notices was unclear and set them up to mistakenly violate it.

Legal Counsel Wally Hick’s word salad attempt at explaining what Baertschiger and West want regarding citizen complaints was a sign he wasn’t sure exactly what they wanted regarding citizen complaints. West went off on county employees driving down the road looking for code violations while Baertschiger said it bothered him that someone could read something in the paper, get mad at him, and call in a frivolous complaint to harass him. West said when he first came on the Board he met with Community Development Director Mark Stevenson and became concerned about the staff time it takes to investigate complaints like one neighbor mad at another because of a barking dog.

“Every complaint is investigated. If unfounded we keep a record of unfounded violation complaints to see what it turns into,” said Stevenson.

Hicks said the policy of keeping names of complainants confidential arose because people were afraid of illegal marijuana growers.

DeYoung argued that no one would file complaints if they thought their neighbor could retaliate. That seemed to be the intent of Baertschiger and West: to stop code violation complaints. West said he was concerned about county personnel driving around looking for code violations. Stevenson said his employees don’t do that. All their inspections are complaint-driven, he said. Baertschiger said he was still concerned about harassment. Public Health Director Michael Weber said in reality all complaints are filed by the county so legally the person filing the complaint is not actually the accuser.

“You may call to make the county aware of something but it’s the county that files the complaint,” he said.

West said he just wanted to make sure no one was driving around looking for code violations and that he wanted to reduce the number of unfounded complaints that take up staff time. Stevenson said unfounded complaints are “minimal.”

It wasn't made clear what action will be taken regarding revealing those who make complaints. DeYoung and Baertschiger asked West to send them copies of his proposed changes in the complaint process.

Underlying Baertschiger's monologue about "modernizing" the way the county's departments handle advertising was his real intention: he doesn't want one dollar of county money to go to the Grants Pass Daily Courier. Department heads at the Commissioners' Legal Counsel meeting asked for clarification of the Board Order moving the county's legal notices from the Courier to the Illinois Valley News. They asked if it meant all county advertising was banned from the Courier. Baertschiger repeated his long spiel about how archaic it is to advertise in newspapers nowadays. West backed him up by saying the county could save money by utilizing the county web site, street banners and the fairgrounds reader board to get the word out. DeYoung said Baertschiger and West were assuming "everybody's got a cell phone" they can use to access county website information.

Weber said he was very concerned the county is trying to limit how they use their ad dollars. He said his department has been doing this for years and can tell the effectiveness of their ads by the people who come through their door. He added that his advertising dollars are built into grants and don't come out of the general fund. Other department heads said state law might require them to violate the Board Order and asked for it be clarified to make it more flexible.

Baertschiger repeated throughout the conversation that his goal was "modernization" while West said he wants to save every dollar he can. Commissioners didn't indicate they would revise their Board Order to address the department heads' concerns.

Equally frustrating to department heads was Baertschiger's idea that all interaction with the media go through the county Public Information Officer. Baertschiger was told by various department heads that they, not the PIO, have the expertise to know what they can and cannot release and have experience doing so. Finance Director Sandy Novak asked if she had to funnel every call she gets by a media person just asking for clarification on a number or a grant. Human Resources Director JJ Scofield asked if the media comes up to the Public Works Director out in a snowstorm should he refer them to the PIO? DeYoung said if the PIO isn't around and some department head calls him to ask what he or she should say to the media "I'm not qualified to judge that." Weber said the press needs to talk to the person most knowledgeable about the subject. West said he felt all news media should go through the PIO because "it's so easy to get caught by TV or newspaper reporters and if you say something it's out there forever."

DeYoung said it would be impossible to keep department heads from talking to the media so what "I think we need is training about what the ramifications are." PIO Jason Roberts said he has offered that training many times to department heads and several have taken it. Baertschiger said it was just his intent to make sure nothing but accurate information about the county gets out. Roberts was asked to update the county's 1998 policy regarding press releases and media and distribute copies to the Board.

Hicks told Commissioners during their Legal Counsel meeting that “we received messaging that the Board wanted to readdress the contract limitations for signing,” he said. “The policy was last revised in 2020.”

Novak told the Board the current policy says department heads can sign contracts without Board approval up to \$10,000. From \$10 to \$50,000 department heads can sign with the approval of their liaison Commissioner. If contracts are higher than \$50,000 they require Board approval, she said.

Baertschiger said he’d like to see anything over \$25,000 put on the Board’s consent agenda. Novak said so far this year 280 contracts would have been put on the consent agenda and asked Commissioners to think about the costs and benefits of doing that would be.

West, who indicated he’s the one who brought this up, said he thought taxpayers would want Commissioners to know where all that contract money goes. Baertschiger kept insisting all contracts over \$25,000 should be put on the consent calendar but if it becomes cumbersome they can redo the policy.

“The reason is we just had an expense approved by a former Commissioner that we didn’t know about when we were anticipating not having that expense and using the money for something else,” said Baertschiger.

While DeYoung grumbled about the 2020 agreement being fine with him, Baertschiger and West pushed to redo the policy and bring it back for discussion.

During their Wednesday, Feb. 8 business meeting, Commissioners heard Emergency Services Director Emily Ring tell them they might be eligible for money from the state’s push to end homelessness but they would have to declare an emergency based on certain criteria.

“A, the unsheltered homeless has increased by 50 percent or more between 2017 to 2022 or B, the rate of unsheltered homeless in 2022 was 80 percent of the overall homeless population,” she said. Ring said she was told by the state that according to homeless numbers from Josephine County they would probably qualify for B.

This set off a rant by DeYoung who said every time the county declares an emergency the Commission loses power but if they don’t declare an emergency the headline in the newspapers will be that the county deprived the city of homeless benefits. According to Ring, the state wants to allocate funds through counties and not through individual municipalities in those counties.

Baertschiger said he wanted verification of the numbers. He asked Ring if the numbers came from organizations that “benefit from having a homeless population.”

Weber told Baertschiger “that’s a little bit of a loaded statement.”

“I know it is but seriously if we had no homeless we wouldn’t have a UCAN. Correct?”

Weber said we wouldn’t have it here but it wouldn’t stop operating.

West declared the whole conversation was over his head and didn't comment. However, after DeYoung's rant he did say he didn't want to declare an emergency then have the state come sticking its nose in Josephine County Business.

Weber pointed out that the county can determine the language of the emergency so they don't lose authority.

Ring said she would get more information from the state and get back to them with how the numbers of homeless people in the county could be verified.

Commissioners heard public comments by Libby Watts who was concerned they will stop paying their dues to SOREDI, an economic development resource, from Amanda Metzler, Chair of the county Cannabis Advisor Panel, who asked the board to try to correct the failure to get a moratorium on hemp licenses and others advising the Board to review the state's open meeting laws, especially concerning committees, and be more efficient at limiting speakers at meetings to three minutes.