

Commissioners' Report

Weeks of June 28-July 7

“If we can work ahead of ourselves and anticipate what’s coming up, that’s what we need,” said Josephine County Parks Director Sarah Garceau during a discussion at the County Commissioners’ Administrative Workshop July 7. Garceau was referring to the Whitehorse Park project but she could have been giving much needed general advice to the Commissioners who have frustrated others, such as those concerned about fire in areas not covered by a fire district in the county and those worried Josephine County’s Sheriff’s Department might go broke before a solution is found to fund it.

Funding for the Sheriff was the main topic of discussion for the last few weeks as Commissioners frantically try to put together something acceptable to voters for the November ballot. During their June 28 Legal Council meeting much of the discussion focused on a 3 percent sales tax originally planned for targeting things tourists buy while visiting during the summer months. However, Commissioner Dan DeYoung asked if Josephine County can make sure the sales tax includes on-line purchases from Amazon and other internet shopping services. He said this would bring in a “substantial” amount of revenue. No one mentioned that most of those sales aren’t likely to involve tourists.

Commission Chair Herman Baertschiger said he thought the problem with trying to get places like Amazon to honor Josephine County’s sales tax would be enforcement. “If we don’t enforce this they won’t,” he said. That led to a discussion about the county’s general ability to enforce a sales tax and whether or not the state would help. Commissioner Darin Fowler said local businesses will get to keep 5 percent of what they collect as an administration fee so they would have an incentive to collect the tax. The cost of setting up such a tax was not discussed but Commissioners did talk about trying a two-tiered sales tax, with Grants Pass shoppers paying just 1 percent while outside the city the tax would be 3 percent. Hicks said they would probably have to do that by offering a reimbursement to people in the city instead of having different levels of taxation.

Leaving many questions unanswered, Commissioners went on to ponder a tax on businesses making money in Josephine County. DeYoung reminded the group that Grants Pass already has a business tax and asked if the city could be carved out. Hicks reminded them they don’t have a lot of research time because of deadlines for getting measures on the ballot. Fowler worried it would inhibit economic development in the county.

The idea of forming a district with an elected board was also brought up but they said they would have to say how much the district would need to tax county residents and how much revenue that tax would bring in before that idea would be seen as credible. Again, Hicks reminded Commissioners they are running up against a deadline.

A straight up levy was discussed but again, Commissioners said they’d need numbers to show voters how much it would bring in and to what extent that would fund the sheriff’s department

and a levy can't be considered a stable source of funding since it needs to be approved by voters every few years.

Other ideas such as a gas tax, removing tax exemptions from land owned by non-profits and imposing a special tax on out-of-town property owners were discussed with skepticism. A gas tax right now would not be popular, removing tax exemptions was called "dicy" by DeYoung and taxing property owners who don't live here wouldn't bring in enough revenue, they concluded. Fowler asked about calling a tax a fee, but Hicks told him voters approve taxes while county department heads decide on fees which can only be imposed to cover costs, not to raise revenue.

Commissioners concluded they have to put something on the ballot the voters will accept or disaster awaits the sheriff's department. Hicks prepared an ordinance imposing a tax on retail sales an ordinance imposing a tax on business licenses just in case those are the options the Board decides to put on the ballot.

Commissioners feared if funding doesn't pass in November the county risks losing deputies who will see the lack of support as a reason to move on. They're also concerned that even if voters pass a sales tax or a levy anti-tax groups will challenge it whichever way they can.

"It seems everything we come up with there are 50 ways why it can't happen," said DeYoung.

In other business Commissioners did the groundwork for getting a measure asking voters to approve or disapprove of the use of psilocybin on the ballot but decided to see what Grants Pass and Cave Junction officials decide before committing their question to the November ballot. Psilocybin, or "magic mushrooms" have had some success, under controlled circumstances, of treating severe depression and PTSD. More information on psilocybin can be found here <https://www.opb.org/article/2022/04/16/magic-mushrooms-for-therapy-vets-help-sway-conservatives/> and here <https://www.opb.org/article/2022/06/09/oregon-psilocybin-rules-shape-who-can-provide-and-access-care/>

Juvenile Justice Director Jim Goodwin asked the board to support an agreement between the county and the Friends of Josephine County Children's Advocacy non-profit so they can oversee the development of the proposed 4,300 square foot building for the Children's Advocacy Center being planned on county property on the corner of 5th and A streets in Grants Pass. The Friends will also run the program. The non-profit was formed to oversee the program because it has access to grants the county government doesn't, Goodwin explained. The program guides children through the process of prosecuting suspects accused of physically or sexually abusing them. The new building and the new non-profit will help revive the program, he said, which has languished in recent years because of budget cuts, COVID and the small space currently housing the program. Last year 250 victims of physical or sexual abuse were handled by the advocacy service, Goodwin said. Oddly, after Goodwin and another man who came in to explain who the Friends were and the status of the project during the Legal Counsel meeting, Fowler mumbled "ambulance chasers" after they left. Baertschiger reminded him they were being recorded but Fowler said he didn't say anything "I'm ashamed of." The Memorandum of Understanding

between the county and the Friends, allowing them to run the program and a 99-year land lease at \$1 a year was approved at the Board's Weekly Business Session June 29.

Sheriff Dave Daniel appeared at the June 29 Weekly Business Session to announce he received word from the state that the county was awarded a one-time grant of \$3.8 million to help with illegal cannabis grows. This money will go mostly for personnel including four deputies and staff in the District Attorney's office. It also covers supplies, equipment, training, travel and overtime, he said. Although this grant is a one-time offer, Daniel said he hopes there will be legislation passed in the next session that will make the grant an annual allotment to counties battling illegal grows.

During the June 7 Administrative Workshop Human Resources Director JJ Scofield introduced Tamra Martin as interim Parks Director after Garceau announced her resignation. Martin is currently Josephine County Fairgrounds Director. Garceau, who has served seven years in her position, said in her resignation letter she is leaving to take a Parks Director job in Lake Stevens Washington. She said she would do everything possible to aid in the transition to a new director and be available as long as needed to answer questions. It is not known whether the controversy over Commissioners' removing Garceau from the Sportsman Park giveaway prompted the resignation. After the introduction Commissioners asked for a status report on county parks. This is when Garceau said progress on the Whitehorse Park project, which involves the installation of more RV spaces, needs to proceed. It has taken three years to get this far and the county is in jeopardy of losing its \$400,000 grant for the project if they don't get it done before the grant expires in a year, Garceau said.

During the July 13 Weekly Business Session Commissioners decommissioned a 30-year-old fuel tank at the Grants Pass Airport they said was probably "just in time" to avoid a costly fuel leak. Then Transit Director Scott Chancey announced he has money for the installation of a wave inductive charging system for his electric busses. A wave system doesn't require a plug. Busses drive over a pad to recharge. Chancey also said he's exploring putting in a quick charge system at the transit hub. DeYoung asked him where the money for this comes from. Chancey said it comes to the state from federal transit dollars. They also allotted Economic Development funds to an office project in Illinois Valley and gave \$3,000 to the Illinois Valley Chamber of Commerce for its 8 week concerts in the park program. The money comes from video poker and lottery funds.

The only person to take the podium during public comments was regular commenter Judy Ahrens who reported on the Fourth of July reading of the Declaration of Independence on the courthouse steps. She claimed they had a huge crowd, people were educated and the barbecue across the street at the Republican Headquarters made the event a success. She thanked Liberty Watch and the Republican Women for putting on the event. Ahrens also continued her quest to get everyone to pick up trash. She said you can really impress other people by helping keep our community "a clean little burg."

During Commissioners' response DeYoung reminisced about seeing merchants sweep and hose down the sidewalks in front of their businesses before opening in the morning and wondered if

they still do that. Fowler said he remembers when people in Grants Pass were polite and kind and hinted that mask requirements during the pandemic turned everyone into a grouch. They all thanked Ahrens profusely for “all she does” and reminded people to attend the sheriff’s funding forums coming up.