

Josephine County Democrats

March 8 2022, General Meeting

Hybrid – Zoom and In-Person

Action taken at the meeting:

- Voted to endorse a NO vote on the Code Enforcement Referendum on the May ballot. No means retaining Josephine County Ordinance No 2021-002 which gives county code enforcement officers the ability to cite and fine primarily illegal cannabis growers non-permitted structures. The ballot question will be “Should Josephine County 2021-002 be repealed? PCPs voted not to repeal the ordinance after a presentation by County Development Director Mark Stevenson, County Council Wally Hicks and Commissioner Dan DeYoung.
- Voted to endorse Brady Keister’s run for District 3 Representative in the Oregon State Legislature.
- Voted to provide Keister’s campaign with \$750 for his candidate’s statement on the ballot.
- Selected Sheri Morin as Alternate to the State Central Committee.
- In the interest of time PCPs present were asked to peruse the Treasurer’s Report and Minutes on josephinedemocrats.org

With an audience of more than 30 people in the building, Chair Dorothy Yetter noted this was our largest gathering since the COVID-19 pandemic confined us to meeting by Zoom. Addressing those present who turned out for the informational forum on the Code Enforcement Ordinance voters will be asked to repeal in May, Yetter said “Democrats work for the people, to keep them informed and encourage voting.”

The meeting began with a Power Point presentation by Stevenson who showed pictures of horrible conditions at illegal grow sites that go unabated because about all the county can do is send letters to property owners asking them to clean up. Ordinance 2021-002 gives the county the ability to cite and fine property owners \$500 a day until they clean up their mess. The ordinance, Stevenson said, came about after neighbors started pleading with the county to do something about the mess, water theft, pollution, human trafficking and in some cases intimidation by illegal growers. Legal grows, he emphasized, have not been a problem. It’s the people who come in during growing season, lease land, sometimes under the pretext of growing hemp, then throw up substandard buildings, bring in old RVs and constructing hoop houses of PVC pipe and yards of plastic which they abandon when growing season is over.

After Stevenson’s presentation Hicks talked about the legal side of the ordinance and DeYoung tried to counter the misinformation floating around about it, then explained why the county needs to keep the Ordinance in place as a tool in its on-going battle against illegal cannabis grows.

Dorothy then opened the forum for questions from those present in the room and those on Zoom. Questions included: Is the county prepared to handle the terms of the ordinance, what can be done about illegal water use, will county workers be exposed to dangerous aggression by growers, can materials confiscated be sold to help pay for clean-up, how will I know if my complaint is heard, are complaints kept confidential, how will the county protect against overzealous bureaucrats, why does the ordinance have a sunset clause, can property owners remove all the trees on their property for grows, what's being done to inform real estate agents about their responsibilities and what happens when growers start burning plastic?

Replies were: there are two code enforcers plus Stevenson in the county acting on about 200 complaints a month. Stevenson has no plans to bring in more staff unless the ordinance is not appealed because at this point about all they can do is send out letters. The county can call in state agencies to help with illegal water use and pollution, which is the number 1 complaint. Soil and Water Conservation districts have estimated about 414 million gallons of water has been stolen. Sheriff's deputies do go out with code enforcers and they are reimbursed for their time. His department does not make money from confiscations or fines, Stevenson said, and that is not the intent of the ordinance. Complainants can be kept confidential by request and are kept informed of actions and results of their complaints. A complaint is always verified before violation letters are sent out and only violations that can be seen from the road are subject to citation. No code enforcer will enter anyone's home or look for violations not related to the complaint. A sunset clause was written into the ordinance so commissioners and staff could review the effectiveness of it and build trust with skeptics. Stevenson said he would bring a quarterly report to the Board to inform them of results obtained through the ordinance. Complaints about trees being cut down are referred to state agencies, especially if that affects waterways or riparian habitat. Real estate agents have been brought into the fold and are being told they must inform a new property owner if there is an on-going litigation on the property involving an illegal grow as the new property owners will be responsible. Some real estate agents are backing away from properties advertised as perfect for growing hemp.

When asked what exactly will the question on the ballot look like, Hicks said it will be "Should Josephine County Ordinance 2021-002 be repealed? Hicks acknowledged the question was purposely made to be confusing by those who petitioned to get it on the ballot. People were cautioned that if you want to keep the ordinance in place and vote YES that actually means the ordinance should be repealed. A NO vote means you don't want it repealed.

An opposing voice was allowed three minutes to make his case before PCPs voted whether or not to endorse a NO vote saying the ordinance should not be repealed. Mark Seligman recommended repeal, saying he's concerned about government overreach and property rights. He also said the law of "supply and demand" will soon abate the problem on illegal grows in the area as growers flood the market and the price dwindles. Giving the pro-ordinance argument after all the presentations, Colette Storms simply said "I believe they (Stevenson, Hicks and DeYoung) laid out a coherent presentation for why the ordinance is needed and I don't know if anything Mark said is true. Vote No on the referendum."

Comments from PCPs mostly centered around the need to get illegal cannabis growing under control and consequences for violations are a way to do that.

Dorothy noted that endorsement means Democrats will actively campaign to retain the ordinance by urging voters to vote NO on the referendum.

Campaign Committee Chair Lynda Spangler announced Democratic gubernatorial candidate state Treasurer Tobias Read will be present on Zoom next week as well as all the candidates vying for the now-open seat on the Board of Commissioners.