

## **Public Safety Council meets Wednesday to consider lowest acceptable law enforcement services for county**

Front Page News

March 15, 2016

By Shaun Hall of the Daily Courier

[http://www.thedailycourier.com/articles/2016/03/15/front\\_page\\_news/news03.txt](http://www.thedailycourier.com/articles/2016/03/15/front_page_news/news03.txt)

Josephine County criminal justice system officials are being asked to give their opinion on what they would consider to be the lowest acceptable level of local law enforcement services.

The officials, members of the Local Public Safety Coordinating Council, are due to meet Wednesday in special session to discuss the issue, tied to a possible request to ask Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to declare the county in a state of fiscal emergency because of a lack of funding for the Josephine County Sheriff's Office.

The Sheriff's Office operates the county jail and provides rural patrols.

Council Chairwoman Diane Hoover said the meeting was being called at the behest of Keith Heck of the Josephine County Board of Commissioners. Hoover is director of the county's health department.

"The commissioners recognize (council) members are on the front line of the criminal justice system here in the county," Hoover said this morning.

State aid in the millions of dollars could possibly flow to the county if the governor declares a fiscal emergency and acts under provisions of an untested state law passed by the 2013 Legislature known as House Bill 3453. The law allows the governor to act when a county is unable to provide a "minimally adequate level of public safety services," or if such a scenario is "imminent." State aid would be matched with a like amount from the county.

Two weeks ago, Commissioner Cheryl Walker proposed that the governor be asked to declare such an emergency, in order to plan for deep budget cuts expected to hit in July of next year. The cuts are being prompted by declining federal payments to the county.

Walker said county public safety funding has dropped to roughly \$9 million this fiscal year, down from nearly \$21 million four years ago.

"What was 'imminent' at the time HB 3453 passed has now come to pass," Walker said, in a draft letter to the governor. "We have a public safety fiscal emergency in Josephine County."

The declining federal payments to the county are tied to federal timber harvests that have dwindled over the last 25 years. And voters have not approved higher taxes to make up the shortfall.

As a result, county budgets have been cut and layoffs hit hard four years ago, with more layoffs expected next year, if temporary federal subsidies known as Secure Rural Schools payments continue to fall or end altogether. The subsidies amounted to about \$4 million this year.

Already, county government employment has dropped by about 25 percent in the last four years, from just over 400 employees four years ago to just over 300 this year, according to Walker.

The Sheriff's Office, at 51 budgeted positions this year, is about half the size it was four years ago. And the county's 30-bed youth shelter and juvenile detention facility has closed.

Members of the public safety council include representatives of local law enforcement agencies, the courts and social services providers. They are due to meet at 3:30 p.m. Wednesday at Josephine County Community Corrections, 510 N.W. Fourth St.

---

Reach reporter Shaun Hall at 541-474-3722 or shall@thedailycourier.com.