

Is crime up in Josephine County?

By Shaun Hall

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The answer is: yes, no, based on anecdotes, based on government statistics, all of the above or, maybe, in the end, based on the viewpoint of who is talking.

"The one point that has been made is a valid point: We need to have reliable statistics," said Josephine County Commissioner Keith Heck, who is trying to do just that — get accurate information about the local crime problem, or lack thereof.

"Anecdotally," he added, "I think we do" have a crime problem.

The county's crime rate came up again the last week, just as it came up a year ago, when opponents of a public safety tax levy proposal argued crime was down, based on their reading of state statistics.

Commissioner Cheryl Walker raised the crime problem issue on Tuesday when she proposed the Board of Commissioners ask Oregon Gov. Kate Brown to invoke an untested state law and declare a public safety fiscal emergency in the county.

"In Josephine County, most property crimes are not reported," Walker said in a draft letter to the governor. "Murders have increased ... Burglaries are so frequent as to be considered by many to be part of our culture."

In her letter, Walker noted a reduction in inmates held at the 262-bed county jail, where the daily inmate count now is 130. That's down 40 or more from years past, and would be even lower if not for the fact that the city of Grants Pass rents more than two dozen beds for the exclusive use of suspects arrested by city police.

Walker also cited the impact from the closure of the county's juvenile shelter and detention facility a few years ago, coupled with the gutting of the Sheriff's Office, where the staffing level is half what it was in 2012.

Even now, the county does not have 24-hour patrol coverage. Most of Sheriff Dave Daniel's staff are employed in the jail.

Disaster, right? Many say no, including commissioner candidate Bill Hunker, who a year ago put together forums at which presentations were made challenging the notion of rampant and rising local crime.

"There is no crime crisis in this community," Hunker told the commissioners at a meeting on Wednesday.

Others took up his banner, including Joseph Rice, who helped organize last year's campaign against a proposed safety levy, the fourth to be rejected since 2012.

"We have a vandalism problem, not a violent crime problem," said Rice, a member of Oath Keepers, a militia-like group.

According to Daily Courier records, the number of murders in the county was four last year, three in 2014, two in 2013 and one in 2012. Prior to that, FBI statistics going back 30 years show murders ranged from none in 2000 to nine in 1988.

Since 1986, the county has averaged 3.1 murders a year, according to a combination of FBI statistics and Daily Courier records. Murders and homicides are not always counted the same way, it should be noted.

Daniel said there were 11 homicides — justified and otherwise — in the county last year. Some were officer-involved shootings, at least one other shooting was deemed self-defense and another was a gunfight over a property dispute.

"We've had more homicides in the last year than we've ever had," he said Friday.

He didn't have hard statistics, however, and said he would have a staffer look for the numbers.

Regardless, with fewer deputies to investigate and report crimes, there can be little doubt that numbers were skewed, Daniel said.

Fewer people were reporting crimes, he felt, due to a lack of investigation. In addition, the formula under which the FBI compiles uniform crime statistics recently changed, complicating comparisons between years.

"You can't really compare 2012 to 2013 to 2014 because of the different systems," Daniel added.

Hunker said he uses uniform crime reports compiled by Oregon State Police. Hunker's numbers for total crimes reported in the county, starting in 2014 and going back year by year: 8,031; 8,490, 7,369; and 8,112.

Walker said she is pursuing the fiscal emergency declaration to open the door to discussion, planning and negotiation, if the state is to assist the county under the terms of a 2013 law passed by the state Legislature known as House Bill 3453.

Under the law's provisions, the state and county may enter into a negotiated agreement to manage public safety services, with costs shared equally. Walker said any new taxes to pay for the county's share would be subject to a public vote. Daniel said the Sheriff's Office would continue to operate the county jail, with state financial help.

"It's all local control," he said. "It's just state money."

The money could be desperately needed in July 2017, when the next big impact from expected federal funding cuts is due.

Daniel said the impact could mirror what happened four years ago, when jail capacity was cut to 60 inmates and patrols dipped to only a handful of deputies.

"If those (subsidies) are not available to us, certainly we're in a fiscal crisis," he said. "It would mean layoffs ... back to potentially worse than 2012 numbers."

Heck, meanwhile, said he is gathering information in preparation for a meeting on Thursday to discuss Walker's recommendation for a bailout by Gov. Brown.

"If we're not in deep doo-doo, we're somewhere around the edges," he said. "Anytime you cut your Sheriff's Office 50 percent, it's a difficult time."

Simon Hare, the third member of the Board of Commissioners, said Walker's proposal was worth exploring.

"We're kind of coming down to uncharted territory, as far as the fiscal outlook is concerned," he said. "We wouldn't be doing our job if we didn't explore the nuances."

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

Fiscal emergency discussions

The Josephine County Board of Commissioners is scheduled to meet at 9 a.m. Thursday to discuss the fiscal emergency issue, a discussion set to be held toward the end of a public work session in the commission's meeting room at the Josephine County Courthouse.

Commissioner Cheryl Walker said she expects to hear reaction Wednesday to her proposal to ask for state emergency assistance. That's when the public may comment on a range of topics during the commission's next weekly business session, set for 5:30 p.m. at the Anne Basker Auditorium, 600 N.W. Sixth St.