

Curry County should consider four ballot measures

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The federal government has broken its decades-old agreement with the people of Curry County by not permanently reauthorizing the revenue stream created to replace timber tax revenues when thousands of acres were taken out of production by federal action. Somehow, continuation of this funding is now seen as an "earmark" or "pork barrel" funding in the eyes of most federal legislators.

So, the people of Curry County have been subjected to a fiscal roller coaster ride for several years now, and we have largely come to rely upon eleventh-hour bailouts delivered by the Oregon Congressional delegation. Even so, the funding is declining and no one should be surprised if it comes to an abrupt end. As that end draws near, the debate over how to deal with the lost revenue is fueling more local political debate and newspaper headlines.

The July 28 issue of the Pilot reports that County Commissioners are still considering options for placing a tax measure on the ballot in the coming months. Commissioners noted that they have taken some dramatic actions to reduce the cost of County government by shifting a number of services to non-profit organizations and enacting other cost-cutting measures. A few of these are mentioned in the Pilot article; I urge the Commissioners to prepare a comprehensive report of all of the actions they have taken in this regard and post it on the County website.

As a member of the Curry County Citizens Committee, I was among those who supported the concept of exploring a sales tax as a mechanism for generating sufficient funding

to sustain County government operations. We have a lot of visitors to Curry County and, on its face, it would seem that a sales tax would pass a portion of the cost of providing services on to people who don't live here. Good for us, right?

Maybe not. Since serving on the Citizens Committee I have learned that just over the border in California, state and local government is lamenting about a phenomenon generally referred to as "retail sales leakage." In short, there is increasing alarm in California that, as their sales tax rate now approaches 10 percent, more and more residents of border counties are crossing over into Oregon to take advantage of the zero sales tax. As a result, there is a movement afoot in Sacramento to reduce the sales tax rate in border counties in hopes of keeping those retail sales dollars home ... in California.

So, while it could reasonably be argued that a Curry County sales tax of 2-3 percent would not be a major deterrent to out-of-state retail customers, that argument quickly fades if California reduces the sales tax rate in Del Norte County by a percent or two.

I propose submitting three property tax measures to the voters:

Sheriff's Patrol Services. The County should form a law enforcement district solely for Sheriff's patrol services. First, the County Commissioners need to determine, in consultation with the Sheriff, what level of staffing is needed to adequately handle the need for Sheriff patrol and response services in the unincorporated areas of the County. Build a budget based upon that level of staffing, and determine what property tax rate needs to be applied in the unincorporated area to fund that level of service. Put that tax mea-

sure on the ballot in the unincorporated area only. If it fails, curtail patrol services in the unincorporated area when the federal money runs out.

General Government Services. This includes services that benefit all residents of Curry County, including those who reside in cities and unincorporated area residents. These services include everything from the assessor to juvenile probation and would include operating a County jail. Determine the cost of maintaining these services at the current reduced levels and calculate the property tax rate needed to fill the funding gap left by the federal de-funding of SFS. Put that tax measure on the countywide ballot.

Include in that ballot measure that the property tax rate would be proportionately reduced if federal funding is restored, or by the amount of new timber tax revenues are received. Include provisions that these property tax revenues cannot be used to pay increased employee compensation above the annual CPI and cannot be used to fund any new service. Provide also that the County must appoint a citizens oversight committee to review the use of the additional tax revenues and issue an annual report to the public on how the funds are being used.

Jail. The Commission and the Sheriff need to make a decision on whether to repair the existing jail or build a new one. Since the existing jail is in a tsunami inundation zone, replacing it is the best course of action. The County needs to prepare a construction budget for the new jail and engage financial services to determine the appropriate term and estimated tax rate needed for a construction bond. Put a property tax bond measure on the

countywide ballot to fund the construction of a new jail. By taking advantage of the current incredibly low government bond interest rates and stretching the payments over 40 years, the tax rate needed should be low.

The County Commission has at its disposal the resources for calculating what the tax rates would need to be if a tax plan was presented as suggested above.

But before any tax measure or combination of measures is placed on the ballot, the voters need assurance that the County has done everything it can to reduce operating costs and that the County will be well managed going forward. The current Board of Commissioners has taken this part of the way. The next step ... which was my Number One item on the Citizens Committee list of recommendations ... is to restructure Curry County government.

What really brought the need for restructuring County government home to me was a presentation by members of the Coos County Citizens Committee. Think about this. Curry County is a multi-million dollar corporation, managed by a tri-partied board of directors ... each of whom individually oversees a segment of the organization and may have a different approach, ability and goals ... and who are not allowed to make any decisions outside of meeting once a week. It is a structure designed for failure.

So the first ballot measure needs to be one that would restructure County government to mirror City government, with volunteer or part time Commissioners that set policy, and a County Administrative Officer to manage the day-to-day affairs. County government needs to be reformed ... needs to be updated ... before the voters are asked contribute more tax dollars.