

POLK COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Minutes of December 18, 2014

Polk County Fairgrounds, 520 S Pacific Hwy. W, Rickreall, OR 97371

1. CALL TO ORDER & ATTENDANCE

At 6:05 p.m., Commissioner Pope called the declared the meeting of the Polk County Board of Commissioners to be in session. Commissioner Ainsworth and Commissioner Wheeler were present.

Staff present: Greg Hansen, Administrative Officer
 Sheriff Bob Wolfe
 Community Corrections/Juvenile Director Marty Silbernagel

2. PUBLIC HEARING: PROPOSED OPERATING LEVY

Greg Hansen explained that in November, he recommended that the Board consider placing a local option tax measure on the May 2015 ballot in the amount of \$0.45/\$1,000 assessed value for five years (meaning taxes on a \$200,000 home would increase by \$90 annually). The Board accepted this recommendation, and this is the second of nine public hearings to collect public input on this process. The Board will make a final decision on moving forward on this process or not after the final public hearing. Since 2008, the staffing levels within the Polk County Public Safety system have dropped from 112 FTE (full-time equivalents), to 78 FTE, an over 30% drop. The proposed levy would "buy" 22 FTE: 12 in Sheriff-Patrol, 5 in Sheriff-Jail, 5 in District Attorney-Prosecution, and 2 Juvenile detention beds.

Sheriff Wolfe explained the funding crisis the county is facing: it is not a mismanagement of funds, but the result of the loss of funding. Since 2008, the County has seen reductions and eventual elimination in payments that had been received from the harvesting of Federal Timber Land located in Polk County. This has created over a \$2 million shortfall for the County General Fund, which is where a majority of public safety funding is budgeted from. This is the reason why the public safety system in the County has been cut so dramatically.

Commissioner Pope opened the Public Hearing.

Mike Nearman, 2570 Greenwood Rd., Independence, OR 97351, testified that he doesn't consider this a public safety levy, but just a tax increase because the Board is choosing to not spend money on public safety. Mr. Nearman suggested that the County should increase Fairgrounds rental fees to generate more revenue and then divert this revenue to supplement the general fund. He also commented that the Fairgrounds does not pay property taxes that could be used to fund the Sheriff's office. Mr. Nearman urged the Commissioners to not move forward on the levy. Commissioner Pope explained that the Fair Board is a separate governing entity, and the Board of Commissioners does not dictate or set fees for the Fair, but the rates are set to be comparable to other facilities. The Fairgrounds is a public facility, for the benefit of the public, and the revenues earned go back into the operations and maintenance of the facilities. Greg also explained that any revenue generated by the fair cannot be transferred to the general fund, but has to be used for Fairgrounds operations.

Brian McGlynn, 633 Stearman St. Independence, OR 97351, testified that this levy is a quality of life issue, and although he lives within the city, he will still support the levy because he feels that all citizens of the county should be safe.

Michelle Fink, 8430 AR Ford Rd., Grand Ronde, OR 97347, testified that even though her house

was built two years ago, it did not go on the tax rolls until the second year, and for a greatly reduced value. She also expressed concern with uncollected taxes. Both of which would go toward generating revenue in the general fund. Ms. Fink also explained issues that she has had with Code Enforcement and other issues she faces in her community due to the lack of patrol deputies in her area. Greg Hansen explained that usually 94%-96% of uncollected taxes are collected in the following fiscal year, and the remaining in following years. It is rare for a house to get foreclosed on from unpaid taxes, they are usually paid before it gets to that point.

Vern Ratzlaff, 15391 Airlie Rd., Monmouth, OR 97361, asked for clarification on current staffing levels within the public safety departments. Greg explained there is currently 16 FTE in the Sheriff Patrol, 27 FTE in the Jail, 12.5 FTE in the District Attorney, 13.5 FTE in Corrections, 6 FTE in Juvenile. Mr. Ratzlaff also testified that in the 50 years he has lived in Polk County, he has had two incidents that he has called for a Sheriff's Office response, and about 20 incidents that he has handled himself. Mr. Ratzlaff asked that going forward, whether the levy passes or not, the Sheriff's Office should hold classes for the public of the proper way to respond to incidents or confrontations when there is no deputy.

Ken Mayer, 363 NW Denton Ave, Dallas, OR 97338, commented that the County is a business, and he understands that when funds get tight, some businesses have to be downsized or shut down. However, Mr. Mayer testified that the County has known about the declining timber revenue for years, but still built a brand new jail 15 years ago. Mr. Mayer thinks that the County should close the jail to save money, and rent jail beds in other counties for a reduced cost. Sheriff Wolfe explained that the Polk County Jail is one of the most efficient run jails in the state due to the design, and can run on a minimum staffing of five. Closing the jail to rent out beds to other counties would drastically increase transportation costs for not only the County but also all of the local jurisdictions. Greg has previously budgeted out the estimated cost to close the jail, and the result is actually an \$800,000 - \$1 million increase in cost to the budget.

Gene Henshaw, 2424 SW Oakwood Dr., Dallas, OR 97338, commented on a handout that was provided that compares Polk County tax collecting and staffing levels to those at Benton and Yamhill counties, and pointed out that Polk County's tax rate is close to half of the tax rates of the neighboring counties. Even if this levy were to pass, Polk County's tax rate will still be over \$0.50/\$1,000 lower than the other two comparable counties.

Russ Knoll from West Salem commented that the Polk County Jail is not only ranked high within the State of Oregon, but also across the Country.

Rod Buchanan, a rural Dallas resident, asked about the difference between going before the voters in the May election compared to a November election. Greg Hansen explained that in May, the voter turnout is usually lower than November. Another factor to influence this decision is what other measures are on the ballot at that time. November elections are also more challenging because property tax statements also come out at that time.

Paul Evans from Monmouth, commented that since the mid-90's, Polk County has had a large increase in wine tourism, which are all outside city limits, and all the traffic from these businesses have to be managed by the Sheriff Patrols. Mr. Evans asked if there was a way to compare aggregate value of the County compared to law enforcement availability. Commissioner Pope responded that it is a challenge with new business considering coming into the County when there is not adequate law enforcement to detour crime. Sheriff Wolfe also commented that the theft arrests since the beginning of the year have decreased 48% due to cuts to the Sheriff Patrol

division. There have also been reports that the insurance companies are now rating areas in Polk County as higher risk because of the lack of law enforcement, which raises Homeowners Insurance rates for everyone in the area.

One member of the audience commented that there isn't enough publicity to get more people interested in attending the meetings and learning about the levy. The Board explained that there will be an article in the West Side in January, the information is posted on the Polk County website. Commissioner Pope also encouraged attendees to write letters to the editor and post the information on Facebook, but pointed out that the County does not have a budget for advertising for the levy.

3. ADJOURN

Commissioner Pope reminded the public of the other scheduled upcoming public hearings on this issue.

Hearing no further business, Commissioner Pope adjourned the meeting at 7:13 p.m.

POLK COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

Mike Ainsworth, Chair

Jennifer Wheeler, Commissioner

Craig Pope, Commissioner

Minutes: Heather Merrill
Approved: January 7, 2015