

## **Measure 6-213: Five-year local option levy to fund public safety operations**

**QUESTION:** Shall Coos County fund public safety with a five-year operating levy of \$0.98/\$1,000 of assessed property value, beginning FY 2024–25? This measure may cause property taxes to increase more than 3 percent.

**REFERRAL:** The Coos County Commissioners voted to place this measure before the voters.

**FINANCIAL IMPACT:** A levy of \$0.98/\$1,000 of assessed property value would amount to \$196 per year for a \$200,000 assessed value home, or \$294 per year for a \$300,000 home. Estimated revenue for the first year of the levy, 2024–25, is \$5,733,463.93. The new levy would begin July 1, 2024, and automatically expire on June 30, 2029, unless re-approved by Coos County voters.

*Note: Assessed value (AV) is the value used to calculate property tax. It is shown on the property tax statement. It is NOT the same as real market value (RMV), which is the market price of the home.*

**PROBABLE RESULT OF A “YES” VOTE:** Levy proceeds would be placed in a restricted revenue fund specifically earmarked for jail and prosecution services, and to ensure accountability, the fund would be externally audited with results made available to the public. Levy revenue would be used to provide staff for another housing unit that would increase Coos County jail availability by 50 percent, to 147 adults in custody, an additional 49 beds over its current 98-bed capacity, greatly reducing the need for releases due to overcrowding. The levy would also fund prosecutors in the District Attorney’s Office to increase the number of criminal cases the office can prosecute, enabling the office to handle the approximately 1,400 backlogged cases and other cases turned away due to staffing limitations.

**PROBABLE RESULT OF A “NO” VOTE:** The levy would not be added to County tax rolls, so would not be available to fund services in the Sheriff’s Department and District Attorney’s Office.

**BACKGROUND:** Coos County has the second lowest tax rate in Oregon, and it faces a budget shortfall next year of \$4 million. Last year, the County raised \$6 million in property taxes and \$3 million in non-property-tax revenue, such as the Bandon Dunes voluntary room tax. The County’s total budget is \$140 million. The County has been able to sustain operations by cutting some non-mandated positions, with total employees now at 350, down from 550 a few years ago. It has also created revenue-generating operations. For example, Solid Waste is now self-sustaining through fees, Riley Ranch RV Park was expanded to generate between \$200,000 and \$300,000 per year in income, the Parks Department was made self-sustaining, and County forestlands were increased from 15,000 to 17,000 acres and harvested on a sustainable yield basis to generate about \$3 million annually to fund other County services. State and federal funds, some of which will not be renewed, have been used to plug budget gaps, but are restricted to certain County operations, such as the health department and roads. Despite these efforts, the County has a large shortfall.

In the Sheriff’s Department, current jail capacity means that any charged people brought in are released unless they displace a currently housed person charged with a lesser crime. This is

“forced release,” dictated by state standards which require a certain ratio of staff to inmates. The Sheriff’s Department budget is \$16.7 million for fiscal year 2023–24. In addition to just over \$13 million in general fund dollars, the Sheriff’s Department received temporary grant money last year and a one-time allotment of \$3.47 million in County reserve money to fund current operations, but the office needs a new revenue stream to add staff positions and maintain competitive salaries in order to fill positions and retain staff once hired.

With current staffing, the District Attorney’s Office has been unable to handle all cases referred to it, resulting in a backlog of approximately 1,400 cases. Attorneys in the District Attorney’s Office have been paid less than prosecutors in other counties, and the office lacks two positions. Salaries have been increased, but that is not sustainable without new revenue. Reduced staff can’t bring prosecutions in any but the most serious cases. Coos County has the highest per capita homicide rate in Oregon, and two homicide cases are currently being handled by the office. Trial budgets are underfunded, especially with the higher expenses of homicide cases.

**PROPOSAL:** The levy would enable the District Attorney’s Office to add 2 positions and maintain competitive salaries that will attract applicants to current and new positions. The District Attorney estimates that the levy would enable the office to catch up with the backlog within a year, and would also help to balance trial budgets for costs such as witness fees, citing an estimated cost of up to \$50,000 for two pending homicide cases but with a current total trial budget of only \$30,000. By increasing the number of prosecuted cases, the levy would increase the ability of Coos County to enroll offenders in treatment and rehabilitation services through Community Corrections. The State of Oregon funds Coos County Community Corrections based on the number of parole and probation clients they have; any increase in the number of sentenced offenders will result in additional funding for Coos County.

This levy would add 7 more jail staff positions to the Sheriff’s Department and maintain competitive salaries to fund recruitment, hiring, and retention of jail personnel so as to increase jail capacity by 50 percent. This means violent criminals will be housed without having to release those incarcerated for lesser crimes. There will be no need to release inmates who have been sentenced to serve time in the County jail.

Note that not all defendants are jailed, however. Under Senate Bill 48, passed by the Oregon Legislature in 2021, a judge decides whether to release a defendant or to require security (bond) in case that defendant does not appear in court as required. This does not apply to those charged with murder or treason, or with any violent felony, who will be jailed. In addition to staff, the levy will also fund overhead costs such as utilities, meals, medical transports, and other services for a larger number of inmates.

The expenditures covered by this levy will free up some funds from the County’s general fund and reduce the County’s budget shortfall. And, according to District Attorney Paul Frasier, if his office is able to secure funds from other sources, the entirety of this new public safety levy need not be collected in the first place.

## **SUPPORTERS SAY:**

- Too often, people who have been charged with crimes are released instead of being held pending a bail hearing or trial, and convicted people are released before serving their full sentences. The additional funding would give the Sheriff's Department a greater capacity to detain these people.
- Having a predictable income stream for public safety agencies both allows them to plan ahead and frees up general fund monies for other County services.
- "In 2023, according to our case management system, we had 8,895 cases referred to the [District Attorney's] office to review. For five people to look at. You can't do it, and as a consequence, we're behind. According again to our case management system, we have about 1,400 cases that we have not even been able to look at because we do not have the time. . . . What we have been doing is triaging." —Coos County District Attorney Paul Frasier
- "I think in the 10 years that I have served as your County Commissioner, that this is the most important thing that has come across my desk. Our justice system isn't working as it should. Our people are doing all they can with the resources they have. . . . People used to get in trouble, they'd get tried, and put in jail pretty quickly. Same way I grew up, discipline was sure and swift, and if we don't have that in our public safety system, we lose that deterrent to bad behavior." —Coos County Commissioner John Sweet

## **OPPONENTS SAY:**

- The County should allocate more money out of its budget for the jail, making cuts elsewhere, or else increase revenue by increased logging and salmon fishing. Others say incarceration would have no meaningful impact on crime rates, and there exist cheaper alternatives such as community service. In the current atmosphere of economic uncertainty and inflation, now is not the time to be raising taxes for a program that will expire in five years anyway.
- "I have attended and commented at Coos County Commissioner meetings for multiple years and feel that basically, the financial impact of this 'Five year local option to fund public safety operations' is not presented honestly. The voters are not told what will happen after this 5-year tax levy ends. They are not shown how the jail operates and what their funding sources are. For example: At a budget meeting, when asked why a \$7,000 stipend was proposed for the District Attorney, the answer was that the state did not sufficiently pay the DA for his services rendered to Coos County." This voter's opposition to Measure 6-213 is that it is not transparent.
- Coos County is a poor one. The amount of the tax increase is quite high.
- Many crimes in our community are committed by people who are addicted to drugs. Their addictive behavior is based on finding the means to the drug, whether that is stealing from family, work, neighbors, etc. There is a drug/addiction problem. Jail is not a solution. Treatment is needed. Jail time is not treatment.

**REFERENCES:**

Notice of Measure Election and Explanatory Statement

*World* newspaper report by Nate Schwartz on presentation to Coos Bay City Council by Coos County District Attorney Paul Frazier, "Coos Bay City Council hears DA levy presentation"

*World* newspaper article by Dean Brickey, "Coos County primary ballot sees eight candidates, three levies"

Comments from County Commissioner John Sweet, Coos County Sheriff Gabe Fabrizio, and Coos County District Attorney Paul Frasier

Article from Coos County Commissioners newsletter, November 2023

"What does your Coos County Sheriff's Office do for you?" from Coos County Sheriff's Department