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FEATURED

## County to rework failed levy proposal for future ballot; New measure to focus on funding public safety

Emily Fitzgerald  
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Commissioners Les Perkins and Karen Joplin participate in a county service prioritization exercise on Oct. 2. Law enforcement was the highest ranking service, and will be the focus of the repackaged levy measure.  
Emily Fitzgerald

Hood River County intends to rework the local option tax that failed on the May 2019 ballot, with the hope that they can get something passed to help stabilize the county's financial situation.

The original measure, called the Public Health and Safety Five-Year Local Option Tax, asked voters to approve a tax rate of 89 cents per \$1,000 assessed value to support public health and safety services provided by Hood River County. It failed 51.43 percent to 48.57 percent — a closer margin than the county’s second revenue measure on the May 2019 ballot, the Prepared Food and Beverage Tax, which failed 59.45 percent to 40.55 percent.

While the county commission decided to abandon the Prepared Food and Beverage Tax, the commissioners agreed that it was worth seeking outside advice on reworking the local option tax for a future ballot.



They invited Mark Weiner, co-founder of the public-affairs political consulting firm Winning Mark, to an Oct. 21 work session to discuss what Hood River County should focus on in reworking the measure.

Weiner told the commissioners that it wouldn’t be smart to ask for a levy rate higher than the 89 cents they asked for in May — even though the previous levy was paired with the Prepared Food and Beverage Tax proposal.

“I know it’s easy to be gloomy about that because every cent on that levy is a vital service,” said Weiner, “... but the reality of it is voters want to feel like they’ve been heard and the first place they’re going to process that is, what’s the total cost of what you’re coming back with.”

The commissioners agreed to setting a rate somewhere between 67 cents per \$1,000 assessed value — the minimum needed to fill the deficit — and the 89 cents per \$1,000 assessed value that they asked for in May.

“I don’t think you can convince the public that you aren’t going out for more than we did last time if we go above 89 cents,” said Commission Chair Mike Oates.

The 67 cent rate would be just enough to take the place of the annual \$750,000 reserve fund withdrawals that have kept the budget stable for the last few years (that fund will be depleted by the

2020-2021 fiscal year) and, to fund county services, would still see some cuts as departments stop unsustainable practices, such as excessive overtime, and drop to a sustainable service level.

“We have been attempting to tread water and maintain services but we’re going backwards,” Commissioner Les Perkins said. “What we choose to do with services, we have to staff appropriately.”

One of the problems with the two previous measures, Weiner said, is that they were funding “a laundry list of everything the county does,” and that this new measure needed to connect each cent of the levy rate to direct service impacts.

Taking that advice, commissioners decided to narrow the scope of the levy to just public safety; specifically, the Hood River County Sheriff’s Department.

While the previous measure was to fund both healthcare services and public safety, the new measure the county is working on for either the May or November 2020 ballot will narrow the focus to just public safety.

The commissioners decided it would be simpler to leave healthcare services out of the levy because Oregon has an “all or none” structure for county health departments — meaning that the county can’t make significant cuts to the health department without dissolving the department entirely and turning all healthcare services over to the state.

The commissioners agreed that including healthcare services as part of the levy would complicate messaging and make the measure harder to pass.

The sheriff’s department receives the largest chunk of the county’s general fund expenditures — 11.4 percent, just under \$5.47 million of the county’s \$13.48 million general fund for the 2019/20 fiscal year — and it would be the department facing the biggest budget cuts if a levy doesn’t pass.

Law enforcement was also the highest-ranking county service in a recent prioritization exercise completed by the commissioners (see sidebar for details).

## Prioritization exercise

On Oct. 7, the Hood River County Board of Commissioners participated in a prioritization exercise in an attempt to rank all of the services the county provides, in the hopes that the ranking would help the commissioners in future budget planning. Commissioners were each given 62 stickers to spread amongst approximately 90 services, each listed on sheets of chart paper hung up around the meeting room, and told to assign stickers to the services they valued most — the only limitation that each commissioner couldn’t put more than three stickers on one service.

The commissioners completed the exercise in about 45 minutes, with department heads on-hand to answer any questions. Mostly, they watched in silence as the

commissioner's put up their stickers.

"I hope you didn't come away with this thinking that if you got a low number, you're not valued," said Commission President Mike Oates to the department heads gathered at an Oct. 21 work session, where the commissioners reviewed the results of the exercise. "I'm sorry we had to do this, but it's part of the process."

Overall, law enforcement ranked the highest, followed closely by managing the certified tree farm, maternal and child health, the jail, and tax collection.

The full list is included in the commission's Oct. 21 meeting packet, available on the county website, [www.co.hood-river.or.us](http://www.co.hood-river.or.us) (click on the Board of Commissioners under the County Departments tab, follow the link to Meeting Agendas and Minutes, then to Meeting Agendas).

While the commissioners agreed that, since the list generally doesn't consider the finances associated with each service, it wouldn't be very useful in budgeting, but would be an informative resource in reworking the levy.

"I think it fits pretty well if you ask for public safety," said Commissioner Bob Benton.

Sheriff Matt English has previously told the commissioners that he is interested in pursuing a public safety levy to give the sheriff's department financial independence from the county's general fund, and the commissioners requested that English prepare an updated department budget and list of services for an Oct. 28 work session.

By the end of that work session, the commissioners said they hope to have agreed on a tentative levy rate and the specific public safety services that levy would fund.

When asked whether the county should be planning for the May or November 2020 ballot, Weiner said that the most important factor would be how much time it would take the county to do effective public outreach, including getting voter feedback before the ballot language is finalized.

"I wouldn't be afraid of May," Weiner said, adding, "there's no question that you could get that work done" if they started now.

While November 2020 would have a larger voter turnout due to the presidential election, Weiner said that a "historic turnout" is still expected for May 2020 due to the Democratic primary.

Concerned about the financial implications of having to wait another fiscal year for the November 2020

ballot, Oates said that he wanted to try for the May ballot, and he set a goal for getting enough information together to start public outreach by the end of November.