

For some, county government is an anachronism. Why have another level of government between the cities and the state? In part, this view may be fueled by the reality that the services a county provides – public health, emergency management and public safety -- are delivered best when they are unnoticed. The fallacy behind that thinking was convincingly demonstrated by Joe Berney, Lane County Commissioner for the Springfield District, and current chair of the County Commission, when he came to the Springfield City Club presentation on June 24. Commissioner Berney was joined by my County Administrator Steve Mokrohisky and Bruce Webber, the member of the Lane County Budget Committee appointed for Springfield.

As he pointed out, the County has been the default agency to deliver solutions for the many crises we have experienced over the past 16 months. From the explosion of the COVID pandemic in March of 2020 to the devastating fires in September, Lane County has been in the forefront of efforts to manage and recover from the crises. “It is clear,” Commissioner Berney said, “that we need to be prepared for emergencies and disasters that we have never anticipated”, even including the sudden appearance of temperatures that exceed anything ever before experienced in the state.



As the Board of Public Health for the county, Lane County and its staff took the lead in responding to the COVID pandemic. It is noteworthy that Lane County was among the lowest counties in the state in terms of per capita infections and deaths per capita. As vaccines became available the county led the effort to get residents vaccinated, unlike in other areas such as Portland where the hospital system took the lead. Recently the county added a sixth health clinic at 100 River Road in

Eugene as a COVID clinic. The county hopes to move that facility into the role of a transitional center for the unhoused. That action, like the recent acquisition of the former Red Lion property, was accomplished using federal funding – no local taxpayer dollars were required.

For much of the past year Lane County has operated two emergency centers, one dedicated to the pandemic, one dedicated to managing resources to fight the September fires and to lead the effort to recover. As part of the recovery effort the County has added three additional Sheriff’s deputies and added staff to expedite land use planning activities related to residents rebuilding their homes and businesses. In response to a question Mr. Mokrohisky said that the Sheriff’s office is not experiencing the difficulty recruiting and retaining peace officers that many local jurisdictions are experiencing, He pointed to the fact that last year the Sheriff’s office had a turnover rate of only 8 percent, well below its historic average of 10-12 percent.

Housing remains a major focus of the County. In addition to the property acquisitions, Homes for Good, the Lane County housing agency, has recently opened 70 housing units (53 of which are subsidized housing) behind the Springfield Fred Meyer facility. Homes for Good is also working to develop another 150 units in Glenwood, probably in connection with the current efforts to spur Glenwood riverfront development. Commissioner Berney indicated his clear personal preference for a proposal that has been made by a Portland development group for a \$350 million private investment to develop that area. He

said that proposal would have created about 500 jobs. He said he is concerned that the SEDA board's decision to start a request for qualifications process may send the message that SEDA is not interested in moving ahead.

When asked about how the County has helped local businesses recover from the pandemic, Mr. Mokrohisky pointed out that even before the federal government had passed the first stimulus package (the CARES Act) Lane County had already invested \$400,000 in support for local businesses and that subsequently the County has used \$4.5 million in County funds to support businesses. He pointed out that the federal aid packages had designated money to support businesses to go directly to those business, through the State and that the money received by local jurisdictions, including Lane County, were directed into four categories: direct response to COVID, money to replace lost revenue or rebuild reserves, essential worker pay and public infrastructure. Using that money, the County benefitted local businesses indirectly by keeping up service levels to those businesses. While Mr. Mokrohisky noted that business who were forced to lay off employees might look askance at the County's ability to not layoff any employees, that action made it possible for the County to keep up services which help those businesses survive and recover. Commissioner Berney singled out the Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce for its significant efforts to help local businesses.

Another effort to support businesses has been the County's adopting of the Community Benefits Bidding Protocol, which allows the County to consider how use of local contractors will benefit the overall economy of the county in awarding construction contracts using public funds. This idea, developed by Commissioner Berney, has now been enacted statewide under Senate Bill 420, thanks in part to Commissioner Birney's lobbying efforts.

Commissioner Berney was asked about the status of efforts to relocate the Glenwood transfer station and how development in Goshen might benefit Springfield. He said that although both efforts are ongoing, there remain a number of challenging planning issues and a need to identify resources to fund these initiatives. He said the Country is now working to get water and sewer service to the Short Mountain landfill, which may benefit both ideas. While County Waste Management has now required all large haulers to go directly to Short Mountain, Commissioner Berney said he had heard from a surprising number of people who actually prefer to haul their won garbage and are dependent on some sort of transfer station.