

In an effort to minimize the impact of a staggering budget reduction from last year, Columbia County Sheriff Jeff Dickerson and the Board of County Commissioners have agreed to an expenditure of contingency money that will restore five enforcement positions into the coming year's budget.

"This won't bring us up to where we were before the budget cuts," Dickerson said, "but it definitely will give us more options and additional resources to handle our emergency calls." The sheriff said three general law positions and 2.4 river patrol positions have been added back to the budget through county money and state Marine Board funds.

The marine board money will be used to put two deputies back on the Columbia River and will also allow the sheriff to place an additional seasonal deputy on the water as well. The seasonal deputy position will be filled July through September and May through June next year. An additional position on Sauvie Island might also be filled, if enough money can be found with state help. Negotiations with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife should determine if that position will be filled in coming weeks.

The five enforcement deputies will augment the three deputies who were left after budget cuts threatened the layoff of 10 enforcement deputies earlier last month. After the smoke clears, half of the sheriff's enforcement division will remain.

"We're very pleased by the Board's decision to bring some deputies back," Dickerson said. "It's a one-year reprieve on the death blow dealt to us this spring by budget cuts and a major loss of revenue from jail boarding fees. I am hoping it will be a down payment on a brighter outlook for the sheriff's office in the future."

The sheriff said the outlook for handling emergency calls was bolstered mightily by the Board's decision to restore the positions.

"With only three enforcement deputies, we were not going to be able to handle all the emergencies, let alone the non-emergency calls we take daily," he said. "This increases the likelihood of our response to emergencies as they happen, with eight deputies now available for emergencies."

Two of those eight will have primary patrol functions on the water, but could be called out on overtime for emergency situations anywhere in the county. The sheriff believes that if citizens are going to support a future mechanism for bringing dedicated funding to the sheriff's office, that the county must explore every opportunity to fund as many positions as possible with general fund dollars.

"If we're doing everything we can to meet the peoples' needs with their present tax dollars, then I feel comfortable asking voters if they are willing to give a little more to support law enforcement in the county," Dickerson said. "We are not ready to ask that question now. But this effort by the commissioners to rescue some positions with scarce contingency money gives voters a chance to see the limits of what the county believes it can do to provide law enforcement services to the roughly 50,000 citizens who call Columbia County their home."

Perhaps later, once voters see how we've responded to this crisis, they will be ready to support further investment in the sheriff's office. Either way, we are committed to providing the best service possible with the resources we have."

The restored positions are the good news for the sheriff's office. The bad news is that four positions in the jail and five positions in enforcement still are on the chopping block. The sheriff's office will still be working with skeleton crews in both corrections and enforcement.

Additionally, expectations for the succeeding year's budget are not promising. The Board of County Commissioners is expected to convene a task force soon that will look at future funding options for the sheriff's office.