

Itzen talks county crisis with homebuilders

By Jane Stebbins

Pilot staff writer

County Commissioner David Itzen outlined his plans for economic development — and made a pitch for the May 21 tax levy increase — at a Curry County Homebuilders meeting Tuesday evening.

The tax — proposed to raise \$4.5 million for county public safety with a tax increase of \$1.84 per \$1,000 assessed value for those living within city limits and \$1.97 for those living in unincorporated Curry County — is also needed to give county commissioners time to develop ideas to help keep the county fiscally solvent.

The so-called “bridge” of time would sunset in five years, and if the federal government contributes any O&C money to the county, the tax rate would decrease proportionately.

“I knew we’d arrive at this point,” Itzen said of the county’s financial situation. “I don’t know how we got here, but I’m here to fix it.”

The county has found itself in this fiscal



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quagmire since the federal government in 2007 started reducing the amount of money it gave to Oregon’s 18 O&C timber counties. In 2006-07, Curry County received \$6 million in timber revenue; this year — at best, and if it’s lucky — the county might receive \$150,000.

If the tax levy fails, the county will have to survive on \$2.1 million, the amount it brings in from the 59 cents per \$1,000 assessed value currently in place.

The homebuilders association said it did not support the levy after Commissioner David Brock Smith outlined details in a meeting there two months ago, and some of those sentiments spilled into Tuesday’s meeting, as well.

“The private sector’s been (living within its means),” said Bob

Pieper.

Homebuilders in attendance asked if the county can’t further reduce its expenses, notably insurance and retirement contributions, and challenge the power held by the two unions that represent county employees.

The county has already spun off a handful of key departments to nonprofits, cutting employee ranks by half from a year ago, to save money.

“We’re doing the job you hired us to do,” he said. “Give us the bridge; let us finish the job. This is the worst time in Oregon to ask for a tax increase, but it might be the best investment you make today.”

The Forest

To replace that federal money would take the construction of 44,800

homes — in a county that only has 11,000 now — 4,714 McDonald’s or 94 golf courses equal to Bandon Dunes.

And it’s the forests that can bring back the economy, Itzen said. It might not be by cutting timber — although state representatives are working on that in Washington, D.C. (See related story on page 1A and below.) — but by getting access to what’s already been downed.

Foresters were eager to get into the woods after the Biscuit Fire, which left thousands of acres of trees downed and ready to be retrieved and milled. But environmentalists, through the courts, precluded that, leaving the good wood there to rot.

Now, brittle and dry, it represents a fire hazard severe enough to warrant another conflagration on par with the massive fire 10 years ago.

Itzen said if people could get into the woods and clear out the duff and old timber laying on the ground, it would generate material —

and revenue — for a proposed pyrolysis plant north of Gold Beach, bring jobs to families in the area and boost the bottom line for the county. The plant owners are still seeking investors for their endeavor.

Curry County could have an ally in this, Itzen said, as President Obama recently expanded the list of threatened species, mostly affecting forests in the southeast United States.

“Their economy could be devastated by these listings,” Itzen said. “We now have an ally (for forest legislation) we never thought we’d have ever seen.”

Housing

Another economic development opportunity about which Itzen is excited is the Housing Stock Upgrade Initiative that Gov. John Kitzhaber in February designated as an Oregon Solutions project.

That project will offer funding for people who have old manufactured homes in need of repair — from roofs to foundations — or replacement.

Curry County is home to 3,300 manufactured homes, of which more than 1,500 were built before 1980 and have outlived their life span. Many are energy inefficient, have failing septic systems — or are downright decrepit — forcing owners to spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing costs.

The project would also involve hiring people to do the work, which would likely take place over the next five to 10 years. The project could serve as a template for other counties in the future. A factory is even being considered to take old debris from homes and recycle what it can, offering even more jobs.

“Finish carpentry, concrete, electrical, refrigeration, heat pumps, roofs, windows — this is huge,” Itzen said.

Project leaders, including Itzen and Christine Stallard, marketing manager for Coos-Curry Electric Cooperative, are working to secure a financing package that could involve low-to zero-interest loans for the work.