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Sheriff's deputy, RFPD**Allow fire districts to contract for law enforcement**

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Ideally, county sheriffs and the state police would have enough deputies and troopers to provide law enforcement services to all of Oregon's rural areas. That ideal is so far distant that it has dipped beneath the horizon, particularly in timber-rich, revenue-poor counties such as Lane. A proposal in the Legislature to allow fire districts to contract for public safety services deserves support.

The proposal is Senate Bill 422, sponsored by Sen. Floyd Prozanski, D-Eugene. Lane County Sheriff Tom Turner put his support behind the bill after speaking with officials of the Mohawk Valley Fire District north of Springfield, an area that stands to lose a resident deputy because of the expiration of federal assistance. SB 422 would allow the fire district to contract with Turner's office to provide a deputy at the district's expense.

Lane County has 24 rural fire protection districts. Most of them wouldn't have the money to pay for the services of a deputy or state trooper, and some of the rest would choose not to even if they had the resources. But if a fire district has both the means and the will to provide law enforcement service in areas where it is becoming practically nonexistent, state law should not stand in the way.

Some small cities already contract with the county for law enforcement services, and the arrangement is beneficial to both. The same concept could be extended to fire districts with the expectation of similar results.

Adding policing to the responsibilities a district created for the vital but limited purpose of providing fire protection would be a big step. But it's not likely to be a step that would be taken without the approval of the district's voters. Contracting for law enforcement services would entail a property tax increase in most districts, which would require a public vote. If a district's board decided to add a deputy or a trooper by cutting back on fire service, its members would answer to voters at the next election.

Proposals such as SB 422 can raise concerns about a fragmentation of services. A law enforcement organization works best when its members are dispatched in a coordinated fashion from a central location and are responsible for serving a broad territory. Maybe someday Lane County can have a sheriff's office that works like that. Getting one might require voter approval of higher taxes, a new governance arrangement or both. If fire districts gain the ability to see to their own law-enforcement needs, voters in those areas could become less supportive of a comprehensive solution to the deficiencies of the sheriff's office.

But that theoretical possibility should not prevent fire districts from obtaining their own law enforcement services if they want them and can afford them. Nothing else on the horizon offers even the option of enhancing public safety in rural areas. The Lane County Board of Commissioners is placing a property tax levy for the sheriff's office on the May 21 ballot, but those funds would be used exclusively for the county jail and juvenile treatment programs.

Not many rural fire districts would be likely to take advantage of the opportunity opened by SB 422; most have their hands full meeting their current responsibilities. But in many areas, no other governmental entity is available to contract for law enforcement. In those areas where this imperfect solution fits, people should be permitted to provide and pay for their own public safety services.

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