



BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

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November 30, 2023

Mayor Remy Drabkin

Council President Adam Garvin

Councilor Sal Peralta

Councilor Chris Chenoweth

Councilor Kellie Menke

Councilor Zack Geary

Councilor Jessica Payne

Via Email claudia.cisneros@mcminnvilleoregon.gov

Mayor Drabkin, Council President Garvin, City Councilors:

When the City of McMinnville and the fire department approached the Yamhill County Board of Commissioners with a request to place on the ballot measures to create a new fire district, we chose to partner with the city in support of a public process and public vote. Despite having concerns over tax rates and the impact to our shared constituents, we understood that a public vote of approval is the strongest form of public engagement and encourages transparency and accountability with regard to how increased tax rates would be spent.

During the fire district measure process, we expressed significant concern over the potential for the city to bring back the portion of its permanent tax rate (\$1.50/1000) that was previously funding fire service, should voters approve a new fire district. The city agreed to “hold off” on levying any part of that \$1.50 and promised to engage the public and poll McMinnville residents and taxpayers to determine what they were comfortable with.

Unfortunately, the city’s effort to engage the public was grossly insufficient with a difficult-to-navigate online survey, poll responses that obscured the true sentiment of public attitude, and a lack of metrics that would qualify the effort as sufficient evidence that the public supports further increases to their taxes.

The only credible effort to justify adding back any or all of the \$1.50/1000 of the city’s taxing authority is to ask taxpayers for permission in the form of a ballot measure, even if in application the vote is advisory due to the city already having authority to levy.

We were shocked to hear the comments made at the city budget committee meeting on Tuesday evening. Mayor Drabkin stated that one of the intended outcomes of the fire measure vote was to “liberate city property tax dollars so that they could be reassigned to other city services”. With respect Mayor Drabkin, that is not what voters thought they were approving in May. City voters were not presented with information by the McMinnville City Council or the fire department that said a vote of approval is a vote to raise taxes by \$2.00/1000. To state otherwise

is disingenuous and does not represent the understanding of or actions taken by this Board when we encouraged participation in the fire district election. Frankly, we feel these actions constitute a “bait & switch” and unnecessarily anger those who supported the fire district formation as a way to prioritize public safety, not allow the city to implement a backdoor property tax increase.

To use the fire district formation vote as a defacto vote of approval for the City of McMinnville to continue levying the old fire service rate does not represent the values of our Board. It was clear during the special budget meeting that the committee is aware of the flawed survey and response effort. It was also clear that members of the committee believe that the fire district approval gives them public approval to levy the full city tax rate. Taxpayer concern is not centered on avoiding taxation, as some would suggest. The concern is around the lack of transparency in this process and the Council’s apparent unwillingness to ask the public for permission to raise taxes further to fund city services.

We strongly disagree with the budget committee’s recommendation to levy \$.50/1000 next year, with the statement that increases should also be expected the following year. As Councilor Peralta aptly pointed out, these rate increases “negatively impact poorer residents” and the cumulative effect of this decision will harm our constituents.

We strongly urge you to seek public approval in the form of an advisory vote for any proposal that adds back a portion of or all of the \$1.50/1000 levy. Strong public engagement and buy-in can be obtained and the ballot is the most equitable way to achieve that.

In Service,



Lindsay Berschauer
Chair



Kit Johnston
Vice-Chair



Mary Starrett
Commissioner

Approved by the Yamhill County Board of
Commissioners on 11/30/23
via Board Order 23-438