

After tough year in '09, Marion County officials see progress

By Michael Rose

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Marion County went through a turbulent 2009. The high unemployment rate caused consternation for nearly everyone: county government was forced to do an across-the-board 5 percent budget cut, and the former sheriff abruptly resigned.

But the three commissioners said Thursday that progress is being made in several areas important to residents. The good omens include two federal grants for programs to help former prisoners re-enter society, the smooth transition of leadership at the Marion County Sheriff's Office, and a new Buena Vista Ferry that is being purchased with federal stimulus money.

Commissioners Sam Brentano, Janet Carlson and Patti Milne spoke to a packed house at the Mission Mill Museum at the annual "State of the County" luncheon. They recapped 2009 and discussed what this year might hold for county government and local residents.

Thursday's event was sponsored by the Strategic Economic Development Corp., the local economic development agency.

Public safety

Brentano said he was pleased with the performance of the Marion County Sheriff's Office under the leadership of Jason Myers, who was sworn in as county sheriff in September. Myers replaced Russ Isham, who resigned after being accused of official misconduct for attempting to cover up an affair.

"I really do believe the department is going the right way," Brentano said. "I am happy and you should be confident."

Well more than half of the county's general fund budget is spent on public safety, primarily the Marion County Sheriff's office. Commissioners said that police protection, as well as supervising parolees and offenders on probation, were high priorities.



Statesman Journal file

A bright spot for 2010 was that federal economic stimulus funds will allow for the replacement of the Buena Vista Ferry, which officials say will benefit transport and tourism.

Public hearing

Citizens will have a chance to learn more about the future of waste reduction, recycling, composting, and garbage disposal in Marion County at a public hearing set for 9:30 a.m. Wednesday in Salem.

The hearing will be held in the Senator Hearing Room of Courthouse Square on 555 Court St. NE.

Source: Marion County

"It is impossible to separate the issues of public safety from healthy families and a strong economy. When one link breaks, the whole chain fails and causes a myriad of problems for our local communities," Milne said.

About 4,200 individuals in Marion County are on parole or probation, and about 26 percent of these people will get into trouble again, Carlson said. She said it was in the economic interest of the county to provide services, such as alcohol and drug counseling, to help ex-offenders find jobs and housing.

Studies have shown that for every 1 percent decrease in the recidivism rate, the public can save millions of dollars, Carlson said.

The county has received two federal "Second Chance Act" grants — one for more than \$569,000 and the other for about \$302,000 — that will fund programs to help former prisoners get a fresh start.

Solid-waste plan

Marion County leads the state in recycling. More than 58 percent of the county's solid waste is recycled, composted, or burned to produce electricity at the county's waste-to-energy plant in Brooks.

The county is exploring ways to recycle food wastes, which county officials say represents about 21 percent of the material that is tossed in the trash. As early as this summer, the county expects to start picking up food wastes from businesses and hauling the material to a composting facility in the Corvallis area, Brentano said.

The program eventually could be expanded to food wastes from residences, he said.

Meanwhile, the county is hoping to have the electricity generated by the Brooks garbage burner officially designated as renewable. Last year, the Brooks plant failed to get a renewable-energy designation by the state, which would have allowed its electricity to be sold at a higher price.

Brentano told the crowd that the Brooks plant produces enough electricity to supply a city the size of Woodburn.

Transportation

Federal stimulus money to replace the Buena Vista Ferry was akin to "manna from heaven," Brentano said. The ferry, which is an important transportation link for farmers and other residents in the area, is in bad shape, and the county lacked the funds to make improvements, he said.

The federal government will provide about \$3.2 million for design, construction, delivery, licensing and installation of a new ferry.

Besides transportation, the ferry also plays a role as a tourist attraction.

"Riding the ferry is like riding a piece of history," Milne said. The ferry now crossing the river was built in the 1950s, but the crossing has been used since the 1850s.

By September or November, the new ferry is expected to be in operation.

The county also received about \$2.5 million in federal stimulus funds that will be used for road projects. About \$2 million will be used for overlays on county roads and the remainder will be

used to upgrade a signal on Lancaster Drive and Durbin Avenue SE.
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