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Dispatchers at the Deschutes County 911 call center direct traffic Thursday afternoon in the main facility, which houses nine workstations. Staff have created additional space by setting up stations in a conference room next door.

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911

To address cramped quarters and inadequate funding, Deschutes County's emergency dispatch center is asking for voters' help

Art Martori / The Bulletin /

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A measure to stabilize funding for Deschutes County's only 911 call center may face an uphill battle in the May 15 election, as some Central Oregon residents have said they oppose the measure. Yet voter apathy may be the strongest opposition the proposed legislation faces, emergency service officials said.

Passage of the 911 levy would have two effects. It would double a levy paid by residents that would otherwise expire in June. And the measure would renew a source of funding for the region's sole emergency call center, which needs more staff and is quickly outgrowing its facility, emergency service officials said.

But in order to pass in the May 15 election, the levy must secure a double majority of approval among voters, required by state law. More than 50 percent of registered voters must first participate in the election and then a majority of the voters must endorse the measure. The levy may fail due to low voter turnout, rather than lack of support, said Lane Roberts, director of Deschutes County 911 Service District.

"There's not a lot of opposition," Roberts said. "The concern is not opposition. It's turnout."

Roberts added the Bend City Council recently endorsed the levy and hoped councilors' support would raise awareness among voters.

According to the latest figures from the Deschutes County clerk, 83,795 voters are registered for the May election. If that number holds until the election, at least 41,898 residents would need to cast ballots. Yet, in the last May election, only 41 percent of 80,553 registered voters turned out.

In the May 2005 election, voter participation measured only 23 percent.

Deschutes County Clerk Nancy Blankenship said May elections are usually characterized by a low voter turnout, as voters usually pay more attention to November races, which include presidential campaigns and national and statewide issues.

"Typically, you would see more voter turnout when there's higher interest level in the ballot," Blankenship said. "Sometimes, there's not as much attention for local elections."

However, Blankenship added that the election this May could draw a majority of registered voters to the polls. Several hotly contested school board races, another proposed levy for fire and medic service in La Pine, and the 911 levy could create significant interest among voters, she said.

"We're planning for 50 percent," Blankenship said. "You always have to be prepared."

But even if the measure drew ample voter turnout, the prospect of increased property taxes drew mixed reactions from residents. Donna Stiff, a 51-year-old small-business owner from Bend, said she plans to oppose an increase in property taxes. Stiff said she's lived in the city 18 years and during that time her property tax bill has soared to about \$3,000 each year.

"Everybody wants a little piece of the pie," Stiff said. "Then they ask you next year for more."

The district is primarily funded by a split-rate tax, with 16 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value set as a permanent rate. Deschutes County residents also pay 9 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value under the three-year, temporary operating levy that expires in June.

May ballot measure proposes increasing the temporary portion of the levy to 23 cents per \$1,000 for five years. For a house assessed at \$250,000, the new levy would increase the total 911 tax bill, which includes the permanent and temporary rates, from \$62.50 to \$97.50.

According to figures from the Deschutes County 911 Service District, the call center each day handles more than 745 nonemergency calls and 193 emergency calls, with a daily average of a call to 911 every 90 seconds. Incoming calls have increased by about 6 percent each year since 2002, Roberts said.

Possible cuts

If the measure fails, the call center would be forced to use for operating expenses a fund dedicated to facility improvements and purchasing new equipment, Roberts said. Right away, he added, the service district would have to stop much of its ongoing training of current employees, including procedures used in medical and fire emergencies. In coming years, the service district would lack funding to hire new dispatchers, so the existing staff would have to deal with increased call volume.

It could ultimately lead to a longer wait for residents, before dispatchers answer their calls, Roberts said.

"By logic, you may find it's taking longer between calls," he said.

Roberts said roughly 20 percent of the district's \$6.1 million annual budget comes through the levy, which is up for renewal. The call center receives the remainder of funds through a statewide communication tax, set at 75 cents for each phone line, and a permanent property tax.

"We're not looking to gouge the public," Roberts said. "We've just reached a point where we can't facilitate any more growth."

Right now, the Deschutes County 911 Service District leases 3,400 square feet of space at the Sheriff's Office for a token rate of \$1 per month. The center houses 38 workers, Roberts said. He added that recent studies showed the call center needs at least 7,200 square feet in order to operate effectively, and could someday require a 17,000-square-foot facility. If the levy passes, the district would devote 7 cents of the increased amount to constructing a new facility.

"We've had to cannibalize our conference room," Roberts said. "We have no locker room. We use a unisex toilet."

Don Stevens, a 75-year-old architect from Bend, said in the past he's placed calls to 911. Although Stevens said he didn't fully understand the measure, emergency calls were so important that he plans to support the increased levy.

"It's something we really need. Having used 911, I can say we really need it," he said. "Whether this is the right way or not, I don't know."

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