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MEMORANDUM

City Manager's Office

Date: April 8, 2026

To: Mayor Jackola and City Council
From: Ron Whitlatch, City Manager
Subject: Municipal Jail Operations Levy – Polling Results and Council Direction

Background

The City of Lebanon constructed a municipal jail in 2009 to support local law enforcement and court operations. The facility was closed in 2023 due to staffing and operational cost constraints. Since that time, individuals arrested for misdemeanor offenses are generally transported to the Linn County Jail when space is available or released when space is limited. In 2025, the City Council directed staff to explore options for reopening the municipal jail and to obtain professional guidance regarding potential voter support for a local option levy to fund operations.

The City Council approved by motion to use an outside consulting firm to guide the investigation of a potential operations levy. Betsy Shultz with PNW Strategies was the consultant that was selected to perform the work. Her contract also included a community opinion survey to inform Council decision-making, that was completed by Nelson Research during the week of March 16th.

Summary of Polling Results

JL Wilson, with Neslon Research conducted a statistically valid survey of Lebanon voters, receiving 296 valid responses with a margin of error of approximately $\pm 5.7\%$.

Key findings presented to Council include:

- General sentiment:
 - 67% of respondents approve of the Lebanon Police Department.
 - 63.7% indicated reopening the municipal jail is important.
- Initial ballot support:
 - When presented with a basic levy question, 48.6% supported the measure—below the level typically considered viable for passage.
- Message sensitivity:
 - Support increased to 66.3% when respondents were informed that the levy would replace an expiring bond and would not increase overall property tax rates.

- Messaging related to reducing repeat offenses and improving community safety also increased support significantly.

- Economic concerns:
 - Approximately half of respondents indicated they would oppose a levy due to personal financial pressures, suggesting voter sensitivity to perceived tax increases.

The consultant concluded that a measure as initially presented would not be expected to pass without a focused public education and communication effort emphasizing the relationship between the levy and expiring debt.

Considerations for Council

During the March 25, 2026 discussion, Council members noted several additional factors that may influence timing and viability of a ballot measure:

- Potential competition from other local tax measures in November 2026 or May 2027.
- The expiration of an existing general obligation bond in 2026, which currently costs taxpayers approximately \$1.17 per \$1,000 of assessed value.
- The operational levy estimate of \$1.00 per \$1,000 of assessed value to fund jail staffing, medical services, and operating costs.
- The potential for future revenue from intergovernmental bed-space agreements, which was not included in the levy estimate and could decrease the amount levied.

Roles and Legal Limitations

Under Oregon law, City staff, including the City Manager and Chief of Police, are limited to providing factual, non-persuasive information regarding any proposed local option levy. Public resources, including City funds, facilities, and staff time, may not be used to advocate for or against a ballot measure or to support campaign activities.

If the City Council chooses to pursue placement of a local option levy on the ballot, leadership and advocacy efforts would need to be carried out by elected officials and community members rather than City staff. This typically includes the formation of an independent political action committee (PAC) to organize campaign activities, fundraising, and public outreach.

City staff may assist by providing neutral informational materials, responding to factual inquiries, and coordinating logistics for public meetings or town halls. However, staff participation in campaign strategy, messaging, or promotional activities would be limited to ensure compliance with state law governing the use of public resources in elections.

Options for Council Direction

The following options are provided for Council consideration. Staff are not recommending a specific option and seek policy direction.

Option 1 – Prepare a Measure for the November 2026 General Election

Council may direct staff to begin preparing materials necessary to place a five-year local option levy on the November 2026 ballot. This would include:

- Drafting ballot title language
- Obtaining certified financial estimates from the Linn County Assessor
- Coordinating with the Linn County Elections Office on filing deadlines
- Developing a project timeline for potential jail reopening

A November general election would not require the City to fund a separate election.

Option 2 – Prepare a Measure for the May 2027 Special Election

Council may direct staff to prepare a local option levy for a May 2027 special election. This option would provide additional time for Council and the community to evaluate the proposal and conduct outreach.

However, the City would be responsible for the cost of a special election, which is estimated to range between **\$60,000 and \$100,000** based on similar elections.

Option 3 – Do Not Pursue a Local Option Levy at This Time

Council may determine not to pursue reopening the municipal jail through a local option levy. Under this option, the facility would remain closed and current practices would continue.

Next Steps

Staff requests Council direction on whether to proceed with preparation of ballot materials and, if so, the preferred election timing. Any direction to move forward would allow staff to begin drafting required ballot title language, coordinating with Linn County Elections, and preparing financial estimates for Council review at a future meeting

Motion

“I move that the City Council direct staff to proceed with Option ____, which is to [insert option description, e.g., prepare a five-year local option levy for the November 2026 general election].”