

# Commissioners draw fire over jail deaths

News Register

By [Nicole Montesano](#) • Staff Writer • May 18, 2017

A Dundee man who described himself an advocate for “public safety and mental health” asked Thursday that the Yamhill County Commissioners publicly respond in some fashion to two troubling deaths occurring in the Yamhill County Jail during the past two years.

Jed Hawk Myers was severely beaten by fellow inmates in 2015, and died of his injuries five hours later, after jail deputies placed him in a medical observation cell and ignored his repeated pleas for help. Debbie Kocan-Samples hanged herself in 2016 after jail deputies placed her in a cell equipped with a corded phone, ignoring a hospital psychiatric recommendation that she be placed on suicide watch. Kocan-Samples was arrested by deputies responding to a hanging attempt earlier in the day in her hometown of Sheridan.

A multi-million-dollar wrongful death suit has been filed in the Myers case. The county has been served with a tort claim in the more recent Samples case, preserving the family’s right to sue.

But there is no indication that the county sheriff’s office took any disciplinary action in response to the apparent lapses in either the 2015 or 2016 incidents. Officials did comment in connection with the suicidal jail hanging at the time, but have had nothing to say about the fatal jail beating, citing the pending legal action.

Ted Urton warned commissioners, “There’s a firestorm brewing.” He told them, “There needs to be some statement from the commissioners about what’s going on here.

“Do you care about these deaths? You need to comment in some way, shape or form.”

He expressed the view that silence from the county leadership “puts our sheriff’s deputies at risk, our police at risk.” He complained it leaves the public “not knowing there is a safe environment in that jail that people are going to be hauled off to.

“There are people that need to know about your moral leadership, your leadership in general, on this matter,” he said.

Urton also urged commissioners to share with the public any recommendations they offered to Sheriff Tim Svenson in the wake of the deaths. The three listened politely and thanked him, but did not respond.

Urton told the News-Register that one commissioner told him before the meeting that the newspaper’s account of Myers’ death was exaggerated, that the chain of events wasn’t as serious as it sounded. In his public comment Urton said, in that event, the commissioners should explain to the public what they view as inaccuracies or misrepresentations.

The News-Register requested, along with other documents, copies of the jail video feed of Myers' final hours and the official medical examiner's report on his death. County Counsel Christian Boenisch released the other documents, but declined to release the video or death report.

"Under ORS 192.502(2), it is our position that disclosure of these records would constitute an unreasonable invasion of privacy," Boenisch said. He added that under additional state and federal laws, he believes it would be illegal to release the records, in part because of the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, better known as HIPAA.

An edited version of the jail video feed has been posted on YouTube by attorney Matthew Kaplan, who is representing Myers' estate in the federal wrongful death suit. The News-Register has posted a link to it on the newspaper website, found at [www.newsregister.com](http://www.newsregister.com).