

During the last couple of months, I have heard several questions regarding our need to expand our current jail capacity. As I begin my third term as your Sheriff, I would like to take a moment to explain why beginning such a project now is so important. When I returned from my service in the Air Force and began my career in law enforcement, back in the early 1990's, the Bulloch County Jail had recently relocated to 301 North. The previous jail facility, which held 28 inmates, was located on Hill Street. The new facility held just over 100 inmates. A little over a decade later the jail size was increased to a total of 466 beds with an additional housing unit. During my tenure we have built a new intake building which also houses a medical facility.

As your Sheriff it is my job to hold pre-trial inmates. That is, it is not my job to punish these inmates, but rather to detain them safely and securely until their trial date. Of course, most persons post a bond and are free until trial. However, those charged with certain violent felonies or have some other reason they can't make bond must be held in jail. We also hold some prisoners who have been sentenced to jail time. When a pre-trial inmate is convicted, either by trial or negotiated plea, we must hold them until the Georgia Dept. of Corrections has space available for them. Sometimes that may be a while.

Georgia Sheriffs have a very complicated task of holding a wide variety of prisoners of various backgrounds, security risks and medical issues. Running of a county jail requires constant management of separation issues involving inmates who must be kept apart for various reasons. It is for this reason that a county jail, unlike a state prison, is considered at full capacity around 85% of bed space. The numerous reasons for separation may include co-defendant issues, institutional behavior issues and mental health or medical issues. In Georgia, prisons across the state can each be dedicated to a specific security status and gender. Some facilities may be specialized. For example, there are transitional facilities, diagnostic/classification centers and a medical prison. Georgia Sheriffs are required to deal with whoever is brought into their sallyport by their local agencies. Each county is obliged to provide a jail and the Sheriff is, by law, in charge of the jail. So, as you see, to properly run a county jail requires ample bed space which is well above the actual number of inmates in jail.

The growth of our jail population has roughly tracked with the booming increase in our county population brought on mainly by Georgia Southern University. We are now preparing for another increase which is expected with new industry in our area. Our jail population is already hitting its maximum on an almost daily basis. The number of inmates in our jail now is over ten times the number of inmates that were held in the old jail on Hill Street, a little more than three decades ago.

To be blunt, but honest, what I am saying is that we are not making a decision of whether to expand the jail, but how we are going to do it. We can plan for a modern and secure facility with room for growth. Or we can wait until the situation is critical and the jail is overcrowded; thus, forcing our county government to haphazardly put up a jail facility that was poorly planned or runs out of bedspace shortly after it is opened.

An overcrowded correctional facility of any kind is much more likely to result in serious incidents including assaults on staff and fights between inmates. Overcrowding also increases the likelihood of incidents which put the public at risk, such as escapes from custody. I don't think any Bulloch Countian wants their jail facility to provide this kind of notoriety for their community.

When the jail facility is past its capacity then policing the communities served by that jail facility becomes more difficult. Making an arrest is not always the answer to every situation, but you must have jail space available to be able to properly enforce our laws. We have over a thousand unserved warrants now. Even if we had the man-power it would be impossible to serve these warrants without the jail space. A well-run jail facility with adequate space is necessary for public safety in our community.

I will probably no longer be in office when the time comes to open a new jail facility. But I believe I owe it to our county, and my successor, to get the wheels turning so the next Sheriff is not way behind the eight ball so to speak. I will close with a very notable quote from former Sheriff Lynn Anderson when referring to jail inmates: "do you want them in my house, or yours?". Thank you for hearing me out, and may God bless our wonderful county.

Sheriff Noel Brown