

Commissioner Questions - Courthouse Security - part 1

Since this is a new subject, I will be including a few questions of my own to help explain what we are and will be doing at the courthouse.

Q. Is Union County one of the few courthouses in the state of Georgia that does not have a security check point?

A. I do not know how many courthouses like us, do not have security check points, but I am sure there are a few. I have been fighting it, kicking and screaming, for several years. While none of us are ever totally safe in our work environment, I have always felt safe in our courthouse. We have two full time deputies on staff. While signs obviously do not scare off criminals, Georgia law has forbidden any weapons from being carried into courthouses and all courthouses have always displayed that signage and everyone knows it. We have never had a serious problem.

Q. How many courthouse shootings have there been in Georgia courthouses?

A. Until this month (June) there had only been ONE shooting, EVER! It was Brian Nichols back in 2005 who killed a judge and three others when he escaped from custody and stole a deputy's gun in the Fulton County Courthouse. Prior to that there had been none. However, it had nothing to do with a lack of security checkpoints, as Nichols was a prisoner in custody who stole a gun off a deputy. Because of that one instance, most courthouses in Georgia began some type of screening process and spent millions and millions of dollars because of one instance that happened one time in down town Atlanta.

There had not been a second shooting in Georgia until June 6th of this year, after all of our planning was already in place. This second shooting occurred at the Forsyth County Courthouse. One deputy was wounded in the leg twice, but he killed the assailant attempting to enter the courthouse.

Q. Will Union County begin utilizing a security checkpoint.

A. Yes we will and I can't tell you how much I dread it. We will begin with hand wands and a walk through scanner on June 2nd (this week), then install two new X-ray machines later in July or early August when they arrive from the manufacturer. When our courthouse and addition was designed and built, a security checkpoint was not an issue, so our courthouse has two entrances we will have to secure. Otherwise, it would be a tremendous problem to attempt to close either one of the entrances off to the general public creating yet additional hardships.

Q. So why are you finally going to install security check points in the Union County Courthouse?

A. Because of the new gun legislation passed as House Bill 60 this year. Director of the Georgia Municipal Association was quoted as stating about the new legislation, that it "would impose unnecessary cost on Georgia's cities and opens them and other local governments up to frivolous litigation." Even if you are a strong gun rights advocate, this new law, in my opinion, overextended its reach in taking away from local governments the right to keep weapons out of our courthouse and other county office facilities. If we

do not put in a "security checkpoint" we can't stop anyone, with their weapons, from coming into our offices. This includes anyone openly carrying guns in plain sight, to possibly include long guns, and the deputies can't even ask to see their license unless there is probable cause.

Q. Are the new courthouse security system checkpoints in our new budget?

A. Absolutely not. It will probably require a property tax increase for next year as we will have to pay for the remaining half of 2014 (our budget year is Jan thru Dec) and the total year of 2015. The new gun law takes effect June 2nd of 2014, so we must start the new security now in mid year, out of budget.

Q. What will the cost to the county taxpayers be for the new courthouse security?

A. It will be significant. We are a small county and operate on a relatively small budget when compared to similar counties. We do not tax you for reserves and therefore, we do not have large reserves. So when something like this comes along unexpected and this is very rare, and we are unable to pay for it out of our SPLOST sales tax revenue, it directly impacts our operation budget. The preliminary security budget is estimated at \$175,000 just for manpower increases to include two new full time deputies and four part time deputies, and over \$ 90,000 in equipment cost, for a total of slightly over a quarter of a million dollars!!

Q. You sound upset over the impact of the new gun legislation related to the county?

A. When you are in charge of the budget, it has to be critical. My main issue is that this will be a tremendous inconvenience as well as expense, for all of the residences of the county. Since our facility is a courthouse as well as an office building, everyone comes here either for grand jury or civil jury, to pay your property taxes, to get marriage or death certificates, to early vote, to attend many different types of court held here, and to attend the many meetings we have. These people will all have a tremendous inconvenience and I am not convinced that real safety will be improved, because we have never had an issue with anyone slipping a weapon into the courthouse except for one GBI agent.