

Q. When our new jail was built why was it not built larger?

A. That is a good question. When I took office on January 1 of 2001, the property for the jail was already purchased, the grading was completed, the bid had been let and the footers were already poured. I had no input into the design, location or cost. If I had been in office we would not be in this position. The previous commissioner decided to take a joint jail with Union and Towns (working together) and instead build one jail for each county - separated. The problem was that the budget had already been set for the joint jail at \$4 million (\$2 million each county). So when the argument between the two counties settled out, someone thought if a regular jail for two counties could be built for \$4 million, then Union County could build our own jail for \$2 million. The architect had an impossible dilemma. So what did we end up with? The new jail was built on the side of a mountain on a site that allowed for no future expansion, with inadequate grading and compaction of the soil and was built way too small to begin with.

Q. I seem to remember that you had to spend a lot of money to do more grading on the jail site. Is that correct?

A. Absolutely. The back side of the mountain, in order to save money, was graded so close to the footings and future edge of the building, that with the first large rain, the embankment fell off into the footings behind the jail. We had to re-grade the entire site on the back side of the jail at a cost of over \$250,000. Once the building was completed, the front side started caving off as it had been inadequately compacted as well, and we had to spend a couple of hundred thousand dollars more repairing that. All of this is to say that sometimes our current projects now may go over budget, but I will NEVER build a project like the jail was built. It will only cost the taxpayer's money for years to come. The jail was built on a site too small, a budget too small, and with no growth built in, as the jail was completely to capacity within 12 months after opening.

Q. What do you plan on doing about the jail and the overcrowding?

A. It will be an issue that requires several folks working together to find a solution. First, the District Attorney's office must process cases quickly, then the judges must be sure they get the cases on the court calendar, and then the Sheriff has to use his discretion to not keep some inmates in jail when it is not necessary. Finally, when we are too overcrowded, we must keep some of our inmates in neighboring county jails. This is not what we would prefer to do, but it is what we are forced to do for now. Even with this, it is much less expensive to house a prisoner in a neighboring jail than to build new jail space.

Q. Isn't the Governor working on Criminal Justice Reform?

A. Yes, he is and it has been one of his priorities that started in earnest last year. The Legislature has recently funded money to assist in a new accountability court system in all judicial circuits. The idea behind this is to keep more non-violent offenders out of jails and at the same time, try to reduce recidivism (repeat offenders) by offering a whole host of counseling and treatment options to work in conjunction with the Judges reducing

sentences whenever possible. . Even with our crowded jail, it is nothing in comparison to the overcrowding in the State penal system.

Q. Why don't you just build a new jail?

A. Cost. As I said in my last week's column, we are spending a third of our budget on criminals and that is ENOUGH. A new jail brings its own host of problems. First, who wants a new jail next to their house or property, so where do you put it? Who wants to spend over \$10 million on a jail facility when we could do so much to help our law abiding citizens with that amount of money. Finally, new jails require many new employees to staff them, so the cost of operation would probably more than double what it is now.

Q. If we continue to have more prisoners won't we eventually have to do something with regards to expanding or building a new jail?

A. A few years ago we carefully evaluated adding on to our jail or building a new one. At the time we were often having 75 to 80 prisoners and the number was growing and estimated to soon exceed 100. But once we reached over capacity, the legal system started working with us to thin out the jail population. The methamphetamine problem that was so prevalent a few years ago and caused so many arrests, has slowed down as well, so that now we have no more prisoners than we did seven or eight years ago. Also with the new criminal justice reform, we feel we can maintain the numbers we have now and keep the population between 50 and 70 inmates for some time. If we occasionally have a few more it is much less expensive to send them to another area jail than to build a new jail. In the future, we will keep watch over this issue, but for the foreseeable future, there is no need for a new jail or an addition at this time.

Q. Did the county ever consider expanding the jail or building a new jail when the inmate population was growing?

A. We certainly did. We had several experts visit and considered several options including putting in portable pre-fab pods, removing our recreation area and adding one new pod, and the possibility of moving the facility all together. However, there were no easy or inexpensive solutions. Adding the portable pods was perhaps the best temporary fix, but then they would not be visible from the current guard central post, and again, it would have required several additional employees and then possibly moving the electrical matting grid for grounding of our electrical system.

Q. Did the overcrowding situation end up taking care of itself?

A. Kind of. Thank goodness, the anticipated prisoner expansion never occurred in the early 2000's and we are still fairly constant with our jail inmate population at between 55 and 80 today. So while it is not the best situation, to spend the millions of dollars now is not the prudent path to a solution. We hope with active arrests and crime prevention which in itself provides a crime deterrent, and the state's new prison reform, that our inmate population will remain fairly stable and prevent the need for a new or expanded jail for years to come.