



Sheriff, county to mull jail contract

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Sun staff writer February 12, 2002

It was completed in 1994, but troubles struck the Alachua County jail almost immediately.

The escape of a convicted murderer was followed by two grand jury reports that laid out a myriad of problems, including managers ignoring steps that could have prevented the escape, mismanagement, lack of accountability and excessive overtime costs. Former jail Director Nate Caldwell will have to answer to related charges in court later this year.

The County Commission had little success and was in fact criticized for not correcting the issues.

And so when Sheriff Steve Oelrich offered to take over the jail four years ago, the commission agreed to a trial run, albeit with some restrictions.

That trial period is set to expire later this year. The sheriff and the County Commission meet today at 1 p.m. to discuss the future contract.

Citing numerous improvements, including national accreditation, Oelrich wants the county to give him long-term, if not permanent, custody of the jail.

He said he also wants the county to remove a barrier restricting him from transferring funds between the department of the jail and other sheriff operations.

"If gasoline prices go up, and I need to move some money from staff services to patrol, then I can do that," Oelrich said.

'Some compromise'

Oelrich said last fall that he would not sign an agreement sharing the jail with the county. He wanted the county to just hand it over. If the commission refused, he threatened to take the issue to the voters or the Legislature.

But on Thursday, a letter from Oelrich arrived downtown explaining that he had reconsidered his position following recent one-on-one meetings with all five commissioners.

"I realized there may be some compromise allowing another interlocal agreement to be drafted negating the need for a new ordinance or voters initiative," Oelrich wrote.

Commissioners say Oelrich has made some significant strides at the jail, and they have said publicly they do not want the jail back. They've also said privatization is not an option.

"The Sheriff's Office is to be commended for the job it has done since taking over jail operations," County Commissioner Penny Wheat said. "We may have some disagreements, but we all want to make sure the jail stays in the public sector."

While lauded for improving jail operations, Oelrich has had to contend with the death of two inmates at the jail in the past two years. Jail officers were cleared of criminal wrongdoing in one of them.

A grand jury in April 2001 reviewed the death of John T. Smith, who died from head injuries he received at the jail. Smith became belligerent in the jail, according to reports. He was pushed by jail staff and hit his head while falling, authorities said. The grand jury found no evidence of criminal conduct by jailers.

Then last summer, Mark Burkett, 18, died following an altercation with correctional staff who earlier had subdued him with a Taser electronic gun. The cause of his death has not been made public.

Oelrich has maintained that his jail staff acted appropriately. The case is still under consideration by a grand jury.

Funding issues

But those aren't likely to be sticking points in hashing out a deal.

Clouding the whole jail issue is a funding matter for law enforcement. The county maintains that rural residents aren't paying their fair share for the services they receive in the unincorporated parts of the county. Officials have said that property taxpayers in the county's nine cities are subsidizing rural service.

For example, city property owners are helping pay about \$220,000 for crossing guards for schools in the unincorporated parts of the county. Wheat said only residents receiving the service - those in the rural areas - should be footing the bill.

The county has asked Oelrich to allow a private consulting firm to analyze how his operations are funded. The county wants to determine if unincorporated residents are paying enough.

"I'm interested in accountability - making residents more aware of where their taxes are going," County Commissioner Mike Byerly said. "I'm not saying the system is unfair now, but I'm interested in finding out."

So far, Oelrich said he fears that the analysis could turn into the county questioning his management of day-to-day operations, although he indicated he would agree to having a consultant come in if they "stick to financial issues."

Oelrich also questioned how the consultant would determine which residents should pay for what. He said the duties of sheriff's deputies tend to overlap jurisdictions.

"We do a lot of our activities in the cities," Oelrich said. "It's hard to pull out the fact that this happened on this side of the line and that happened on that side of the line."

The jail contract meeting is scheduled to begin at 1 p.m. in the Alachua County Administration Building, Room 209. Janine Young Sikes can be reached at (352) 337-0327 or janine.sikes@gainesvillesun.com.