

The Sheriff's View

Dear Citizens,

There was an article in the November 27, 2004, edition of the Gazette, Opinion section, titled "Jailhouse Shock." I feel it necessary to clarify some information to the citizens of El Paso County. It appears the point of the letter was to create hostility towards county government and sensationalize the issues before us, I must take offense at the subheading, "County officials show maximum stupidity." I would think after the overabundance of negative political ads the public has endured this year, they could be spared this ongoing, uninformed, name-calling of our county officials.

I am proud to be associated with the dedicated individuals who give of themselves so unselfishly in serving the people of El Paso County. Most, if not all, become public officials with the intent to serve the public to the best of their ability. Our jobs are sometimes difficult, considering the Constitutional and other unfunded mandates we have to operate within, combined with the budget constraints placed on us and our own concerns for fiscal responsibility. We often find ourselves having to make decisions that we know will be unpopular to one segment of our population or another. No government can make everyone happy. Our goal is to make the best decisions we can, based on the best information we have, for the greater good of our great community.

The writer suggested that the Metro facility will soon be abandoned. This is not the case. Currently, in addition to housing inmates, the first floor of Metro is occupied by the Support Services Bureau of the Sheriff's Office. This Bureau includes employees assigned to Civil, Personnel, Internal Affairs, Records and Reports, Information Technology, Finance, Grants, Concealed Handgun Program, Research and Development, Legal, and Public Information. In addition to being occupied by the Support Services Bureau, Metro will continue to play a vital role in inmate transport and court security. The Sally-Ports and the underground tunnel connecting the jail to the courthouse will continue to be used due to its high security features.

To further set the record straight, the Metro jail was built in 1973 with the capacity to house 312 inmates. When it was built some of the technology used, such as the security door systems, was technology designed in the early 1930's. Metro is old and its' operational methods are outdated and conflict with today's industry standards. With the constant 24/7 use, and metal against metal wear, many of the internal door mechanisms require constant service and in most cases replacement parts are no longer available.

In the early 1980's, the Metro facility began experiencing consistent overcrowding and discussions of an expansion began. The original plan for the facility called for additional floors to be added to create more bed space. Unfortunately, new building codes prevented that option. From this setback, the idea of a separate facility became necessary. The Criminal Justice Center (CJC) was the solution. The CJC opened in the spring of 1988 with a bed capacity of 384. Sheriff Barry, who was Sheriff at that time, requested a 500 bed facility; however, the financial resources to meet that request were not available.

The overcrowding issue and the aging of the Metro facility have been at the forefront in the future planning of the Sheriff's Office and the Board of County Commissioners (BoCC) since the late 1980s. The planning included expanding CJC by adding one minimum security tower and one maximum security tower replace Metro. In November 1995, the BoCC placed the expansion issue on the ballot, which again failed by a large margin. In response, the Sheriff's Office enacted several jail alternative solutions, such as Gateways Through the Rockies, increased work release and Comcor inmates, expansion of the Good Time program, etc.

In April of 1997, the Sheriff's Office prepared a facilities plan for the BOCC which included: the Minimum Security Unit (MSU) with an additional 400 bed capacity; and a CJC expansion proposal with 868 beds for both minimum **and maximum** security inmates. The cost estimate for the expansion, at that time, was \$34.5 million. The anticipated completion date was in 2001, followed by the closure of Metro in 2002. This effort failed as well primarily due to a lack of funding resources, and we continued with our internal initiatives, in an attempt to do the best we could with what we had for as long as feasible.

In 1998, the Metro facility began to experience a great deal of security mechanism failures. The Sheriff's Office presented options to the BoCC to deal with the problems. The first option was for replacement of the housing unit door controls at an estimated cost of \$2.4 million, with an unknown life expectancy. The second option was for the refurbishment of the same controls. This option was estimated to cost \$1.2 million and estimated to have a life expectancy of four to five years. Option 2 was chosen and the work was completed in 2000. Many of the problems at the Metro Facility and the need for renovations and/or replacement were included in the County 1998-1999 Strategic Plan, as well as the County Executive Capital Improvement Plan planning process and the 2000 and 2001 County Strategic Plans. In each of these documents, the County expressed the need for the CJC expansion, to include maximum security bed space.

Since 1998, our county officials have accepted that the Metro facility would be closed and possibly converted to courthouse space by 2002. When that date passed, 2005 was the anticipated time frame. Considering the budget constraints and balancing the pressing priorities we currently faced, our county officials determined that the wisest course of action was to address the first issue of the overcrowding at the CJC and courthouse facilities. This issue has been addressed with the opening of the MSU, the current minimum security expansion project at CJC, and the initiation of the courthouse expansion project.

The second priority was a solution for the aging Metro facility. A consulting company hired to evaluate county government buildings revealed that Metro was in worse condition than previously thought. Cost estimates indicate that continuing to repair and renovate the current facility would quickly surpass the cost of building a new facility. The options presented ranged from \$5.4 million to \$10.5 million the first year and an

ongoing \$1.37 million per year. These options were short term fixes and did not resolve our community's long term needs.

With the public's support, we can spend what is necessary now to provide a stable long term solution or spend millions of dollars on lawsuits, with no viable solution for housing maximum security inmates.

For more than twenty years, the County has been faced with finding a long term remedy for detention issues regarding overpopulation and an outdated Metro facility. Unfortunately, large county issues such as these can only be remedied with major capital investments, which are made especially difficult when there are very limited resources. Despite these challenges, our Board of County Commissioners, past and present, has and continues to support the Sheriff's Office and this community, by seeking the best and most fiscally prudent options. These issues have been discussed in open public sessions, as well as, provided in written form for many years. The Gazette editorial, "Jailhouse Shock," is an attempt to create shock in a situation that calls for thorough and informed reasoning. I believe we can learn from history and armed with that knowledge we are positioned to make better decisions. However, detention issues can be very complicated and very costly to resolve. I would suggest we, as a community, look toward the future and exert our energies to resolve our challenges, rather than participate in unproductive activities that accomplish nothing more than creating confusion and cynicism. Jails are a community problem and one that only a community can resolve.

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