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# Sheriffs Department Expansion -- Is It Right?

**Prisoners are overloading the county jail, and the number of local court cases has increased by 300% in a single year. Now Sheriff Bradfield again wants to expand his department to handle the extra prisoners. What does this mean for the county? Here are the facts.**

Lincoln County appears to be facing a crisis: Our county jail and court system have become severely overloaded. There are suddenly too many prisoners and not enough places to put them, and the local district court docket in 1995 has tripled since 1994. Citing these facts, Sheriff Bradfield has asked the county commissioners to authorize the expansion of his facilities to house the growing jail population.

The County Commission must now ask, "What is the right thing to do?" Should the Sheriffs Department be given whatever it asks for? To represent the needs of the people, the commissioners need your input, so it is important to understand what the issues are.

## Why is There a Crisis?

The first question to ask is, "Why is the jail overflowing?" Obviously, this means that police in Lincoln county, both local and state, are making more arrests now than ever before in our history. The Sheriff says the jump in arrests is due to increased traffic on US-93, but traffic certainly hasn't increased three-fold in a single year. Is there now three times as much lawlessness in Lincoln County as there was in 1994? To all appearances, our county remains a safe place to live, due mostly to the vigilance of its citizens, so why the dramatic increase in arrests?

The reason the number of prisoners and court cases are rising is that more police are patrolling US-93 and making more traffic stops than ever before. Every time a car is stopped, there is a possibility that drugs could be found in the car, so more stops mean more arrests, leading to more prisoners and more court cases.

The next question to ask is, "Who is being arrested?" To visit the district court while in session is to see a steady stream of drug offenses. Most seem to involve people from outside the county who were passing through with no intention to stop. In other words, by making more traffic stops, Lincoln County is only addressing the drug problems of big cities like Las Vegas, Salt Lake or anywhere else travelers on US-93 might be headed--while doing little to solve drug problems at home. Trying to stop all drugs on US-93 is a very expensive undertaking that will absorb the entire county budget if we let it. It should not be attempted without the full knowledge and consent of the local taxpayers who are funding it.

## Other Motivations

A third question to ask is, "What possible benefit does the Sheriff's Department get from making more arrests?" The simplest cause-and-effect is this...

1. More traffic stops lead to more drug arrests and an overcrowded jail.
2. An overcrowded jail provides an excuse for demanding more space.
3. The added jail cells justify adding more officers to manage them.
4. More officers and bigger facilities justify the Sheriff's demands for a larger budget--if not this year, then next.

5. Too many deputies with nothing to do lead to still more traffic stops resulting in overcrowding even in the new jail... and the cycle repeats.

Whether or not it was planned that way, this has become an opportunity for the Sheriff's Department to increase its size, budget and political influence where these would not be granted otherwise. At each point in the cycle, the Sheriff can claim--as he so often does--"We have no choice." In fact, no one has more choice than he does about how his deputies are deployed. Traffic stops are the easiest form of law enforcement, running up the arrest numbers while requiring no detective work or leadership.

On a per capita basis, the Lincoln County Sheriffs Department is already one of the largest and best funded in the country. For the population, it is much larger than police forces in even the most crime-ridden big city neighborhoods. Adjusted for cost of living and their full medical benefits, department employees are also among the best compensated in the country, many earning \$40,000, \$50,000 and more.

This is all justified by the Sheriff by saying that the county's big land area requires more and better-compensated officers to cover it all, but in reality the deputies rarely stray from US-93, the easiest place to patrol. There will never be enough deputies to cover every outlying area, and the people in these areas, like Rachel, seem to like it that way. Conscientious citizens who know their neighbors are the first defense against crime. People who have chosen to live in this county are self-reliant enough to take care of themselves in most situations, and many resent supporting an oversized, overpaid police force to address out-of-county drug problems and build an empire in Pioche.

## The Current Debate

The last time the County Commission gave in to the Sheriffs Department's expansionist tendencies, it cost the taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars. That was the failed Detention Center, an ill-considered attempt at for-profit jailkeeping that was sponsored by Bradfield and commissioner Ed Wright--who seems inclined toward appeasement on the current issue as well. Now, as the Sheriffs Department seeks to expand its facilities yet again, it is important to ask the Sheriff and county commissioners the kind of hard questions that nobody seemed to ask the last time. We need to know....

- Why have arrests and court cases increased so dramatically in a single year--the year immediately after Bradfield won re-election?
- How can the jail be expanded without ultimately costing the taxpayers to maintain it and increasing our already high tax rates in future years?
- What assurances are there that the Sheriffs Department's won't continue to expand its staff, justified by the bigger jail?
- If the budget and staff will not be increased, then what current duties will officers be taken away from to manage the new cells?
- What are the limits on traffic stops? Will they continue at the current high level? Should our county be known as a place where all tourists are routinely pulled over on the highway?
- How much will it cost our courts to handle the increased work load? Will that expense be passed to the taxpayers, too?
- How far will the Sheriffs Department go to fight out-of-county drug problems? What is it doing, apart from traffic stops, to address drug problems here at home?
- What are the people of the county getting for the already bloated Sheriff's budget?

To be fair, the State Police are also responsible for many highway-stop arrests that end up in our courts, but with both

state and local police intensively patrolling the same stretch of highway, one wonders if there isn't a duplication of effort. Only the county can respond to off-highway problems, so isn't this where the deputies should concentrate their resources instead of US-93?

**No police department can be relied upon to police itself. If citizens do not take an interest in how the Sheriffs Department is enforcing the law and spending county resources, then the county will effectively become a "police state," where those in power do whatever they want to serve their own interests, as crime grows and rights dwindle. Good intentions alone will not prevent the abuse of power; only active oversight can.**

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Paid for by Glenn Campbell, HCR Box 38, Rachel, NV 89001  
See the "Lincoln County Justice" web site at <http://www.cris.com/~psyspy/lincoln>