

**IN MY OPINION**

**Caroline Porter**

**Back to the drawing board**



Last Friday, Sheriff Jim Thompson and I chatted in the "interview" room of the Sheriff's department in the Public Safety Building. Thompson had spent three days working on the Knoxville bank robbery and the suspects had just been arraigned at the courthouse before our meeting. At the same time, he was dealing with arbitration procedures and the special meeting of the Jail and Sheriff's committee of the County Board the night before — all this in addition to the day-to-day management of the Sheriff's department. Needless to say, he hadn't had much sleep.

In spite of his hectic schedule, the Sheriff was calm, poised and ready to talk about the status of the new jail.

The complications of locating the new jail adjacent to the public safety building were clarified Thursday night when architects reported that the ground on the west side would not hold a three-story, separate building without huge expense. Thompson said enormous expense would be incurred because of the need to relocate sewers and utilities located under the proposed site. Another problem is the possibility of undermining the foundation of the existing public safety building.

"So now it's back to the drawing board," said Thompson. He said the public understood the ground west of the Public Safety building was an option when they voted for the sales tax, so it was important to examine it. "The public is okay with it and with what we knew at the time." At this point, he feels the advantages of having the new jail adjacent to the current police and sheriff's department to consolidate services have been outweighed by the tremendous costs.

"I don't think we want less at this point," said Thompson. "We may have set ourselves back by 30 days, but our two primary concerns are staying within the budget and staying in the time frame. We're willing to sacrifice the time-line, but not the budget."

He said time is urgent, though, because construction costs are constantly going up. "We feel honored that the public passed this (sales tax) and trusted us. So the last thing we're going to do is violate that trust. We want to do it right." He said additional sources of revenue may be found in the next 30 days.

Thursday night the jail committee recommended soil borings on the east side of the Public Safety building and at the county Annex property on South Prairie Street. Thompson suspects the soil will be the same on the east side.

"The property at the County Annex is not large enough for a one-story building (which is preferable) with parking," said Thompson. "We're talking to construction people next week. If it's used, we'll have to purchase adjacent property and demolish some structures."

He said that just plopping the new jail down in green space somewhere in the county is not that easy, because the jail is not a welcome addition to residential areas. But other sites will be considered. Knox County is probably first in line for ownership of the old Army Reserve property on East Fremont Street, for example, but until it's available, he said, it's not practical to consider it.

I mentioned the fact that problems in the current jail seem to be non-existent since he became Sheriff. Thompson said his background in corrections has been valuable and that there is, in fact, new management in the jail. Jail staff was increased, procedures changed, the jail cleaned and painted, rules enforced, prisoners treated equally and fairly — all done by a staff which is both professional and proud. All of these things contribute to much better attitudes of both staff and inmates, Thompson said.

Thompson said another critical factor is that when the jail population hits 60 for any length of time (maximum is 54), inmates are shipped to other counties. When I asked if this was costly, he shot back, "It's a lot cheaper than million-dollar lawsuits." He said that overcrowding is dangerous and that by not easing the situation in prior years, the county made a mistake. The county still has lawsuits pending as a result of several deaths in the jail before Thompson was elected.

Thompson made a point of praising the continuing leadership of Knox County States Attorney Paul Mangieri in the effort to build a new jail.

As for me, I'm beginning to like the possibility of the sheriff's department separating itself from the public safety building entirely. I hear the city could use the space, the Sheriff could certainly use more space and the county would save about \$55,000 a year in maintenance of the building.

One final note: As one who has served in public office, I understand that government *cannot* be run like a business. A company CEO has the luxury of making quick decisions, consulting very few people — certainly not the public. Elected officials have the painstaking and frustrating responsibility of reaching consensus and approval of committees, city and county boards, and in this case, the voters, before they can make a move. Representative Democracy is certainly the best form of government in the world, but it is cumbersome, slow and not always efficient. And for good reason. Dictatorships are efficient and quick, as in "Chop off his head."

We must be informed, participate and be patient.

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