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A New State Prison on 39th Avenue was DOA

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The potential of a new state prison in northeast Gainesville on 39th Avenue was a concept dead on arrival. Not because it was out of harmony with the local growth management plan but because it was against the best interest of every elected official in the county.

A state prison with some 2,000 inmates on 39th Avenue between Waldo Road and the airport provokes questions and raises issues that elected officials, members of the criminal justice community and prison industrial complex are not prepared to handle in public.

The starting point of every question and issue comes from a simple profile of the inmate population to be confined in prison.

Sixty-eight percent of all felony convictions involve drug law violations or drug incited crimes. For each of the last ten years, drug crimes were the largest category of prison admissions in Florida. These alone represent 30 percent of the annual admissions.

Young men and women under the age of 25 years represent 25 percent of prison admissions each year. In Florida, the average education level of the inmate population is the sixth grade. The uneducated youth of Florida leave prison to join the national fabric of recidivism which is 68 percent.

In 2006-07, Alachua County sent 751 men and women to state prisons. Over the years, Alachua _ s percent of the total state prison population ranges from 1.5 to 2 percent. Currently, this equates to over 1,500 men, women and children.

Considering the growth in prison admission and lengthening of sentencing, Alachua County could fill this prison with local residents in the near future. Any overflow would easily fit into the existing state prison and work release center on NE 39th Avenue.

A discussion of incarceration levels in Alachua County would be incomplete without including the figures of the county jail. The current jail population is around 1,000 inmates. However, a jail annex is under construction to relieve overcrowding and provide for growth.

This means Alachua County is facilitating the incarceration of over 2,500 men, women and children in state and county facilities. This equates to an annual incarceration rate of close to 1,000 per 100,000 Alachua County residents.

This is a rate higher than the state of Florida as a whole which is higher than the national average. All three are averages higher than any country on God _ s green earth. Makes one wonder how Canada is able to survive as a democracy with an incarceration rate of 110 per 100,000 populations.

Think in terms of the criminal justice community that it takes to support such an incarceration rate. It takes a massive number of politicians, lawyers, police and correction officers at the tax payer _ s trough to apprehend, adjudicate, and incarcerate this number of felons, 68 percent of whom are in

for drug or drug incited crimes.

The demand for law enforcement and correction officers is enough that Santa Fe College maintains a separate campus on NE 39th Ave for their training and education.

Bear in mind this is a county that prides itself on its clean industries. The county's economic engines are government bureaucracies, the University of Florida, Santa Fe College, the VA Medical Center, Shands Hospital, and North Florida Regional Medical Center.

Any economic analysis quickly elevates the county criminal justice community into the top tier of the economic engines of the community. Although the financial impact of illegal drugs in the county is not clearly measurable, there are some windows that indicate a drug economy of millions of dollars.

The first window is a new Gainesville Police Department complex paid for in part with \$4.5 to \$5 million coming from law enforcement civil forfeiture funds.

The second window was a drug bust in 2005. Law enforcement estimates this area ring alone put \$24 million worth of cocaine on the streets of Gainesville in a two year period. They also said this bust would only temporarily slow the flow of cocaine into Gainesville.

The most recent window indicates a rather cavalier approach towards supplying Gainesville with Marijuana. A local commercial freight company was used to transport 1,000 pounds of marijuana, valued at \$1 million. The discovery of this shipment of illegal drugs was not by the police but by employees that became suspicious of the package.

Two points emerge out of these windows and prison inmate profiles. It is clear that those being convicted of drug law violations are not the ones capable of sustaining this level of drug use. Second, no one considers it in their best interest to prosecute the users creating the demand for illegal drugs.

The people going to prison are the uneducated foot soldiers of the drug trade. They are the necessary but expendable middle men and women that link the educated and professionals from the county's clean economic engines to the drug cartels of the world.

When the foot soldiers become dysfunctional or overly successful; they are arrested and sent to prison. On the way, they are harvested of their profits, first by the criminal justice community that processes them and second by the lawyers who defend them.

These are facts known to every elected official from the City of Gainesville to the Governor of Florida. However, it is a system that produces the necessary political gold of votes and campaign contributions for their re-election.

A second prison on 39th Avenue would be too big a white elephant for the community to ignore.