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Felons; an Economic Mainstay of Alachua County

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Alachua County would suffer a major economic shock or may even implode if the criminal justice apparatus was removed from the economy. How did this come to pass in a town built around a flagship university? How is that in a total population of some 220,000 citizens of whom 70,000 are students that there are over 12,000 felons?

Some 7,000 of these men and women were the essential but disposable foot soldiers from a drug subculture that supplied the 'responsible recreational drug users.' Once these foot soldiers outlive their usefulness in the world of illegal drugs, they are relegated to a life sentence of servitude as tax paying citizens without a political voice.

At one time, 'taxation without representation' was one of the bedrocks of our democratic revolution. However, the argument has been made that this is not applicable to Florida because it came into the Union as a slave state.

Education, medicine and government bureaucracies comprise the economic triad of the county. Remove the criminal justice system with its federal, state and county layers from the government bureaucracies and the state Farm Bureau on I-75 becomes the lone standout.

A walk around and through the facilities of the criminal justice system brings home the enormity of this judicial jungle. The starting point is three imposing courthouses with over 25 active courtrooms in the heart of downtown Gainesville. Last year, these courts mandated 80,000 hours of enforced servitude in the form of 'community service' to Alachua County.

Then walk up NW 6th street to the Gainesville Police Department. Here you will see a police department that bought an adjoining furniture store for additional space. Across the street is a humongous fleet of idle vehicles at the ready.

Drive out East University to the sheriff's office and you will see a big box supermarket that has been converted to the county law enforcement headquarters. As with the Gainesville Police Department there are an impressive number of vehicles that fills the parking lot of this former big box supermarket.

Next, drive east on North East 39th Avenue from Waldo Road and you will see a string of facilities that safeguard the fruits of this judicial jungle. These are a state prison, a prison work release center, a prison road camp, the county jail, a county jail annex under construction, and finally a police academy run by Santa Fe Community College. All within the city limits of Gainesville.

Then there are a few secondary facilities that are not nearly as impressive but equally intimidating for the people that walk through their doors. The first stop is court services and Drug Court at 14 NE 1st street. Then there is the probation office in the Old Opera House located in the downtown square.

The last station on the tour is not only symbolic but the most informative. This is the states attorney building on 120 West University and the offices of the Public Defender on 14 NE 1st Street. Not too long ago, the states attorney took over the old 1st National Bank building. A superficial comparison of the staff and facilities quickly dispels any notion that the scales of justice are in balance.

If there are still any doubts about what kind of a gold mine Alachua County is for the legal community; open the yellow pages and you will see 74 pages of attorneys listed.

Should we measure the effectiveness of this bureaucracy by the number of men and women sent to prison, it would be a definite growth industry. Last year, Alachua County sent 658 men and women to prison as compared to 304 a decade ago.

One of the first questions is how did we get to the point where the criminal justice system became such an economic force in the community? It appears to be a convergence of three political initiatives: felon disenfranchisement, civil forfeiture and the war on drugs.

Felon disenfranchisement has been a part of every Florida constitution since 1838. Over the years it served as a mechanism to limit access to the political arena for the blacks. However, insertion of the felon clause in state licensing provisions limits access to the trades and professions licensed by the state. The felon provision is also used to exclude felons from both government and civil housing. All of which has some striking similarities to some of the provisions within the black codes that are a throwback to the Reconstruction Era.

The war on drugs started out as an effort to diffuse the political opposition to the Nixon administration in the early 1970s. In Florida, it has become a springboard for the established power structure to strengthen existing constituencies by sensationalizing crime and expanding the prison industrial complex.

Civil forfeiture started as a mechanism to strip criminals of their ill gotten gains and enhance municipal general revenue funds. However, its dynamics were radically altered when the proceeds were shifted to law enforcement agencies. This is now a significant revenue stream for these agencies that is independent of and in addition to the community tax base.

The life force that energizes these political initiatives is provided by 34.8 million Americans spending who knows how many billions of dollars on illegal drugs each year. That translates into one incredible demand curve that is going to be met.

For the most part, the men and women caught up in the supply chain of illegal drugs are either substance abusers themselves or those that have precious few other options. Options limited by the lack of education and employable skills in an increasing technological world.

There are 7,000 of these men and women in Alachua County that have been convicted of felonies related to or inspired by illegal drugs. These are men and women who are relegated to a life as second class citizens in the service sector without a political voice.

If this does not have a familiar ring then turn back the clock to Reconstruction. Substitute 'black code felonies' such as vagrancy, breaking a water pipe, participating in a common-law marriage, and stealing edible meat for the current drug related felonies. Then substitute agriculture sector for service sector.

It makes one wonder how the economies of Maine and Vermont survived by allowing felons to vote from their prison cells. Is it because they don't use drugs or is it because they don't have a slave state mentality?