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## **Jails and Barometers (Major)**

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The county jail is the finest barometer of local politics. It measures the effectiveness as opposed to the rhetoric of elected officials. The recent events in the Alachua jail are a case in point.

On the surface, there was one rape and sexual abuse case in the last 3 or 4 months. Both the county commissioners and State's attorney have reacted with an appropriate sense of righteous indignation. This indignation underscores the maxim a strong offense is the best defense.

By initiating an investigation of the jail they can control its scope. The question should be: Why is this not a routine matter instead of waiting for a crisis.

Make no mistake, Alachua county jail has some problems and any outside look by professionals will surely improve the situation. However, in over 1,000 visits spanning the last 7 years to jails and prisons in North Central Florida, my opinion is the county jail is in the top three facilities visited.

Some background: the jail was built in 1994 with a capacity of 920 beds. National standards set a 15% open bed capacity for appropriate classification arrangements. This means the number of inmates for safe jail operations is 782.

In 1994 the jail had an average fill of 450 inmates. By 1998, it reached an average of 816 inmates and seldom went back to the safe operating limit of 782. It reached a high of 1003 inmates in June of 2003.

Alachua went from a public incarceration rate of 260 per 100,000 in 1994 to 450 per 100,000 in June of 2003. Someone should have been asking What is going on? However, when we compare incarceration rates of Alachua County in relation to the rest of the world, these numbers take on new significance.

Our cousins to the north in Canada have a ratio of 100 and across the Atlantic in England, a ratio of 135. Something is radically wrong in this county no matter how you look at the numbers.

Jail crowding, classification problems, and overextended correctional officers are a recipe for disaster. Compounding this recipe for disaster is an inmate population ranging from career criminals to harmless drunks. Crowding and overextended correctional officer staffing speak directly to choices made by our political leaders. A choice that places both jail staff and inmates at risk.

The sheriff has repeatedly asked for more space and resources. It has been a conscious decision on the part of the county commissioners for the last five years to ignore the jail problems by not dealing with the realities required to operate a safe and efficient jail.

None of the commissioners have bothered to look at the trends, themes, and patterns in the numbers to see if something could be done to head off the looming crisis they now face.

There was one aspect that was clearly foreseeable in 1990s. The judiciary has been operating under political guidelines that have become not only increasingly severe but rigid as well. Laws are characterized by zero tolerance standards, statutory minimum prison terms, and mandatory minimums for time served. Have the Alachua county commissioners provided a solution or contingency plan to accommodate this reality?

Another aspect of jail crowding is the dance between prosecutors and defenders orchestrated by the court. A dance guaranteed to add billable hours for the defense and justify additional staffing for the prosecution. Inmates have been held in the county jail over three years awaiting trial and then offered plea bargains with

credit for time served to avoid trials. Inmates have spent years in the county jail-awaiting trial. A period that makes a mockery of the concept of a speedy trial.

One of the big questions is: why are so many more people in jail? People often reach a point when it is in their best interest to break the law for some economic incentive when there are no perceived alternatives.

The most often cited statistic is about 80% of the people that go to jail are unemployed. The battles fought by Alachua County to keep business out are the stuff of local legend and need no further comment.

Education is the basic prerequisite to any employment opportunity. However, Alachua County schools hold notable positions within the state. Of the 67 counties in the state of Florida, only 3 counties have a higher dropout rate than Alachua. Of 67 counties in Florida, only 13 have a lower graduation rate.

In the year 2002, 70 percent of all inmates going to Florida prisons tested below the 9th grade. This means that 70 percent of the inmates are not even eligible for GED training while in prison. Worse yet, 55 percent tested at a 6th grade or lower education level.

Let's reverse engineer the statistics to see if they still hold true. During the year 2000 the US did not rank in the top 10 countries of the top 25 industrialized countries for math, reading or science. The leaders were Japan, Korea, Finland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Ireland, with none having an incarceration rate greater than 156 per 100,000.

Alachua County has an incarceration rate that hovers around 400 per 100,000. The incarceration rates go off the scale when 50,000 transient university students are pulled from the statistical base.

Is there a symbiotic connection between economic opportunities, education and jail rates? Yes. Is this connection obvious? Yes. Has anything been done about it in the last five years?

Our commissioners have a history of avoiding hard decisions. Cases in point were the construction of the current jail and courthouse. Both were done by direction from the judiciary when the situations became intolerable. Why do we elect commissioners when judges make the decisions?