

OKALOOSA COUNTY SHERIFF LARRY ASHLEY Q&A ON THE 2013 BUDGET:

Explain the budget this year at the OCSO.

In order to grasp the level of concern we have, we must examine the budget in its proper perspective. That perspective is that our agency has already made enormous cuts and experienced mass reductions in manpower and resources while our county population and calls for service continue to grow. Despite this continued growth our county's revenue is less today than it was 8 years ago. Trying to provide basic service to more people with fewer resources is counterproductive to the mission of protecting and serving to maintain our quality of life.

We also have to understand that by using any measurement tool available, be it the CPI, EPI, or just plain retail prices alone, it costs more to operate at the same level today than it did last year and the year before that and the year before that. Price increases in basic things like fuel, electricity, ammunition, vehicle maintenance, communication and computer technology, insurance, and many other necessities continue to take their toll on the number of deputies we can put in the field.

With the dissolving of our Environmental Unit, Traffic Unit, and Street Crimes Unit, the number of patrol hours taken off the streets of Okaloosa County hampers our ability to prevent crime and forces us to be reactive rather than proactive. In addition, we are working to cope with a reduction in court security screeners, civil process servers, investigators, technology staff and clerical employees.

Here at the Sheriff's Office we have experienced a nearly 20% reduction in manpower funding or \$5.6 million over the past 5 years. This reduction has come at a time when the permanent population of our county has increased 6% and our tourist population has increased well above 20%. Violent crime in our county increased 26% in 2011 and 15% in 2012 for a two year increase of 41%. The fact that violent crime has nearly doubled in the past two years should give all of us pause in regard to the type of community we want to live in.

With the exception of consolidating services or continuing to cut services to the point of failure, we can choose to increase revenue in a responsible manner or suffer the consequences. There are really no reasonable options left.

What do you think is needed to adequately fund the agency at an acceptable level for public protection?

I don't have a short answer for that question but here are some "Budget 101" things to keep in mind. We can't in good faith continue to cut resources while our population, calls for service, crime and demand for our services continues to increase. We must also measure ourselves against other agencies servicing similar populations. We have one of the lowest per capita costs for law enforcement services in the country. While our per capita average remains at a \$160 the national average is \$270 and the southeast region is at \$303.

Along with population and per capita costs, we must also examine crime rates and the ratio of officers per 1000 citizens. In regards to crime, the State of Florida is currently enjoying a 42 year low crime rate while Okaloosa County has experienced a 41% increase in violent crime over the past two years. Our officer to citizen ratio is currently at 1.45 officers for every thousand citizens while the national average is 3.2 officers and suburban counties have a 2.7 officer to 1000 citizen ratio. In 2011 our agency answered 188,000 plus calls for service. In 2012 we answered a record 210,000 calls for service which is a 14% increase in calls for service in one year. How can any operation, public or private, be successful while handling ever-increasing demands for service alongside a steady and significant decrease in resources? I believe our citizens agree that public safety is a high priority government function that requires adequate resources in order to maintain our way of life.

Why take on this battle? Tax increases are never popular. You are an elected official so why call for tax increases to fund law enforcement when you know it will generate a wave of criticism?

It's never popular to go against the grain however I didn't grow up easy so I don't expect tough subjects to be easy. I also know that the citizens of this community aren't afraid of the truth. They didn't hire me to bury my head in the sand and refuse to tell them the challenges we face together. The simple fact is that we are no longer a melting pot and as a society we no longer share the same opinions, values and beliefs. This results in government's inability to build consensus regarding its basic priorities and that leads to government involvement in many things that it was never intended for. As citizens we are self-governed and voluntarily subject ourselves to the law. Because of this I don't believe anybody can argue that law enforcement and public safety is government's primary responsibility. The issue however is not a Sheriff's Office problem rather it is a community one. We can be apathetic and do nothing or we can choose to stand in support of our community and our elected officials to address the challenges we face together.

It won't be easier or popular to send another 20 or 30 deputies home either. It certainly won't be any easier when we don't have deputies available and/or equipped to answer calls or follow up with complaints and the investigations that follow. It won't be any easier when one or more of our children is hurt or killed because we couldn't afford to invest in their safety. It won't be easy telling a citizen that we don't have the resources to investigate their criminal or traffic complaints either.

We have an expectation of basic public safety that is all too often taken for granted. What the good citizens of this community have expressed to me time and time again is that they don't want drugs, prostitution, gangs, shootings and other violence in their community or schools. We want our wives and daughters to be safe when shopping at grocery and convenience stores and we want our children safe while they attend school away from us. We want our loved ones to be safe from drunk and aggressive drivers while traveling our roadways. We want our business to be free from vandalism, robberies, frauds, and embezzlements. In short, we want and expect to live as part of a civilized and lawful community. That right and expectation however has a monetary cost.

I have been in the law enforcement profession for a long time. I have had to make some very tough decisions including budget ones. However the simple fact is that our quality of life is going to suffer if we continue on the path we're on. Before we allow these facts to fall on deaf ears, I'll ask our citizens to answer the questions put forth to me on almost a daily basis. "When do you call off the search" or when do you stop the investigation? What is the monetary value of a single life? Could we have done more? The answers to these questions greatly affect our quality of life and each of them has a monetary figure. Determining the right answer is never easy however I won't stand by while we continue the erosion of our public safety capabilities without telling our citizens the consequences. I'm willing to take the criticism because I know we are doing the right things for the right reasons.

Some critics say that the agency could cut take home cars as a way to save dollars. This issue seems to always come up in the debate. What's the rationale behind the take home patrol vehicle and cost?

The first thing everyone should know is that our office has already reduced its fleet size by 57 vehicles in the past 4 years. We must also recognize that as a law enforcement agency we are fleet dependent to get the job done. Our vehicles are the primary tool of our profession and they are also the lifeline we have when providing help to our citizens. That help comes in the form of our ability to respond to emergencies and routine calls for service in an immediate and timely manner with the equipment and communications necessary to render aid and assistance.

In virtually every study regarding law enforcement fleet plans, (and there have been many), take home car plans are the most efficient, cost effective plans available. The take home fleet plan is a force multiplier, crime deterrent program, and management accountability tool all in one. Absent that capability, the 24/7 fleet plan decreases our ability to put resources in an area in a timely manner, eliminates the crime deterrent factor, and would require significant increases in manpower needs while lessening our ability to hold individual officers accountable for vehicle use and care. The 24/7 plan would also greatly increase our maintenance and vehicle replacement costs because engines, transmissions, tires, and a host of other parts don't last very long with 24 hour continuous use.

Having said that, we must be able to fund a capital line item that ensures that these emergency vehicles are replaced on a 5 or 6 year rotation as they wear out. With 250 patrol vehicles and 50 older line cars for our volunteer Posse and breakdowns, we would need to replace 40-50 vehicles annually. That is just one cost of doing business that we have been neglecting as a result continued budget reductions. Until we address this problem, at some point in the near future, we will have a fleet of vehicles that are not roadworthy and will be unable to respond to calls for service. This same scenario has already occurred in years past at a nearby county and they were forced to implement a 1 cent sales tax for capital vehicle purchases. The Sheriff's Office fleet is also not the only fleet in our county government which has been reduced and in need of replacements. It seems hypocritical to ask officers to hold other drivers on the roadway accountable for the condition and roadworthiness of their vehicles while asking them to drive ones that are deficient.

When so many people are still suffering from the effects of a long term weak economy, some say everyone has to do their part to deal with less revenue. Just live within your means. How do you respond to that?

I would respond by stating the obvious, we have already cut back almost 20% of our budget while our population, calls for service and crime continue to increase. I would also respond that we work daily to find efficiencies and reduce costs while doing more with less. Again, our agency already has one of the lowest per capita costs (\$160) for law enforcement services in the entire country. The per capita average in the Southeast region of the US is \$303. We also have one of the lowest officers to 1,000 citizen ratios in the country at 1.45 in comparison to the southeast region average of 3.2 officers per 1,000 citizens. I would also say that our county has one of, if not the lowest tax millage rates in the state of Florida, and that we are one of the few counties in Florida that do not utilize the available gas tax, franchise fee, and sales tax revenue available to our neighboring counties who we compete with for economic growth.

I would also add that we have lived well under our budget for 5 consecutive years and with many reductions in needed resources. The problem however is not a Sheriff's Office problem - rather when our office doesn't have the resources to adequately address crime in our community it hurts our community. It hurts our businesses, our families, and our neighbors. It also hurts our economy. We all know that the first questions that are asked by those seeking to establish a business or a home here are: "What is the neighborhood like and is it safe?" "What are the schools like?" We know this because these are the very questions we asked ourselves when we established our own homes and businesses here in Okaloosa County.

One of the most concerning issues is that our county is solely dependent on the general fund for basic government services and this fund source is the ad valorem property tax. As it stands now Okaloosa County property owners are funding services to record numbers of visitors who pay little to nothing for the services they receive. Sheriff's Office calls for service in our bed tax jurisdictions are primarily tourist visitors. Since bed tax dollars, which are paid by tourists, cannot be used for regular government functions, our property owners are stuck with the tab. This is why we recommended, advocated, and supported our state legislators and county commissioners in their efforts to change the law prohibiting the use of bed tax dollars for beach, marine, and traffic patrols in our tourist areas. It only makes sense that those who are receiving the services should have some part in paying for them. This legislative proposal however faced stiff opposition from Disney and the Hotel and Restaurant association and failed to pass in this legislative session. We however spend millions and millions of dollars marketing this area and bringing record numbers of visitors to our area without regard to the financial impact of having to provide public safety services to this influx.

Lastly, our county isn't poor and it hasn't stopped growing. In spite of the economy our area is one of the fastest growing locations in the nation. You would think that growth in people and tourists would also mean increased revenues however that hasn't been the case. What has been clear is that violent crime has increased dramatically while the resources needed to combat it have been reduced. Absorbing growth while reducing resources has a breaking point and this

concern has largely been ignored. Leadership demands being willing to confront tough issues and to see past today and to the community we are in danger of becoming if we further neglect crime-fighting operations.

How much is it going to cost to add School Resource Officers in elementary schools and is it worth the price tag? Why or why not?

Our cost for providing School Resource Officers to High School and Middle Schools, (14 of them), is about 1.3 million dollars which is shared equally between the Sheriff's Office and the School Board. Providing for 26 additional SRO's for elementary schools adds another 2.2 million dollars to that cost. This cost is also shared equally between the Sheriff's Office and the School Board.

The question in regards to the price tag and its worth is a question of priorities. I have heard from a great many of our citizens regarding this issue and the vast majority support, and many have demanded, that we take action to better protect our children at school. Considering the number of violent incidents that we witness in our society and in our community, how many of them will it take before we deem our children at risk? It is not as though we are immune to crime and violence in Okaloosa County.

I certainly believe that School Resource Officers have and continue to make a difference in our schools already. If you were to ask the Bay County School Board Members if a School Resource Officer made a difference the night a deranged gunman entered their meeting, just a few years ago, intent on killing them all, I would dare say that they would agree that he did. In fact, I believe they would say that they owe their lives to that officer's action in the face of that deadly threat. Our own School Board and County Commission meetings are staffed with armed deputies every time they meet as a result of that incident and many others like it.

Though I agree that a School Resource Officer is not a cure-all solution, it is my professional opinion that they are the first and primary response necessary in protecting our children in schools. Absent a trained and armed officer on campus, would we have our principals, teachers, or council members confront and disarm a deranged attacker? Do we herd our children into a classroom and lock them safely away while mayhem rules in the hallways, effectively trapping them from escape? I have no doubt that SRO's on campus will greatly improve the odds in favor of the innocent.

The role of the School Resource Officer is also multi-faceted and includes crime prevention as well as an intelligence gathering function that will help them, as well as school administrators, address and filter out the criminal element of our society which attempts to enter our schools every day. Some of those things include court orders, child custody disputes, domestic violence and stalking, child abuse and neglect, the mentally challenged and much more.

I would also remind our citizens that as a society we choose to fund armed security at the banks which keep our cash safe. We choose to protect our airports, courthouses, hospital emergency rooms, parades, concerts, and many other institutions and events which we deem necessary. Should elementary school children whom are defenseless be any less of a priority for law

enforcement? I and many others believe that they should be our foremost concern and the first to receive the resources we have available. It is indeed up to our community to decide what budget priority we place on children's' safety.

I also believe if you were to ask the parents and teachers of children who have been bullied, assaulted, and killed while at school, they would tell you that the safety of our children is worth the price tag of a school resource officer.

For a video version of Sheriff Ashley's discussion of the budget, please link to:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BPPA5p8hbnE>