

INTERVIEW: Undersheriff Andy Moyer

On May 20th, Columbia County successfully passed a jail operating levy giving the sheriff's office about seven million dollars for three-years. With less than 300 votes to spare, citizens stepped up -- unlike citizens in other Oregon counties -- and did the right thing for public safety within their community. Two days later Columbia County Community Relations Coordinator Randy Sanders sat down with Undersheriff and Jail Commandant Andy Moyer to discuss the issue.



RS: Please explain the situation in regards to the guard-deputies in the jail. Do you currently have a full staff?

AM: No. We have been losing staff over the past several years. We've lost recently two deputies, in fact today is a deputy's last day today and he's packing up his gear right now. Our one and only non-sworn control technician, who works the control room (*editor's note: this is a very skilled job that requires the technician to operate software that controls the opening and closing of pods and doors within the jail. The technician must be able to open and close doors precisely at a deputy's orders, usually when transporting inmates and moving inmates around.*) gave her two-week notice yesterday. So, ah, we have a severe staffing problem. We are going to start the hiring process as soon as we can, it will take some time. The funds aren't available to hire these new positions until July 1. We get the hiring process ready, and then what we'll do is try and expedite that process as fast as we can, although there are certain things we just can't expedite (quickly), background investigations are one, we have to do thorough background investigations to have someone in those positions. Then we'll also have to do training. For the deputy positions that requires the academy down at the State Police Academy in Salem, the Correction Academy. In addition to that we provide some Columbia County-specific training for our policies, our computer system, records system and other stuff that is specific to our jail here so there will be some other training besides the academy. Then there will be on the job training with a coach for one to three months before they can work on their own, on a schedule. It's a long process before we can get a deputy from the starting point until they can work on their own.

RS: And you'll be starting right now?

AM: We are starting to look at the process, but we can't even hire anyone until July 1. But we will get a process started.

RS: Can you operate the jail currently without a full staff?

AM: We don't have full staff, but we're going to do our best. We've already been having to use patrol deputies who are dual-certified, so they have correction certification as well, they will be put into the jail as well to work shifts as well as myself. I have worked shifts in the jail. Our patrol lieutenant, who is dual-certified, will work shifts in the jail, so we'll do what it takes. We'll also put in overtime money.

RS: Will this hurt public patrol?

AM: Yes, it will hurt patrol. Patrol will become less available. We're already severely understaffed in regards to the patrol unit as well.

RS: How many people, total – including the control technician – are needed to operate the jail at one time?

AM: On duty, at one time, we need four people in the jail. A minimum of four. That's for the amount of people we have in the jail right now. When we get up to expanding the beds, which this levy will provide, we'll get up to 100 local beds, we'll have enough.

RS: Can you explain the jobs of these four guards?

AM: We have one person in the control room (*the control technician*). Then there's one person who is assigned to booking, which books new people coming in. Either booking and release or lodging them. They also do the releasing. They do our matrix release (*Editor's note: matrix is a system involving a series of credited points to an inmate. These points provide the necessary information that warrants an in-mates probation, release, etc*), when a person's sentence is up, they release a person when they get bailed out which an intricate process. It sounds easy when you think about it, but that includes getting all of their information into the records system, their current charges, classifying where in the jail they'll be housed, taking and inventorying all of their property like clothing, figuring out if they're on any current medications on the outside and match those up with what medications we authorize in the jail which will include getting them setup with our jail medical staff. So it's a lot of work just to book someone into the jail. Then there are roving deputies.

RS: Talk about the control technician; isn't this a job that takes a special skill set to perform?

AM: It is, I couldn't do it. I can go back there and be a roving deputy, but I have not spent the time needed to learn that job. They operate the entire facility. If you hit the wrong button, it opens the wrong door. We do have back-up system for that if it were to happen, there's back-up stuff in place. You can't just sit in a classroom and learn how to do that job, it take 'on-the-job' training. All the correction deputies know how to do that job, they spent the time to learn. But the patrol deputies, even though they're dual-certified and because they don't spend shift after shift in the jail, they don't even know how to do that control job. It does require a special skill-set to know that system in the control room.

RS: Are there any other deputies giving notices?

AM: Not that I'm aware of at this point in time, but we do have deputies who are in the hiring process with other agencies prior to the levy results coming in. They were going through that

process, understandably so, and they've been offered jobs with other counties and they did decide to take them. Remember, this is a three-year levy, it's not a permanent, dedicated funding source. So the question arises, 'what happens in three years?' If the Timber Funds are still gone, if revenue from local property taxes are still going down instead of going up, then there's still the question of 'what will happen in three years?' The other point is, the other counties surrounding us like Multnomah and Washington County, they're larger and they do pay more than Columbia County does for corrections deputies, so if they get a job offer from one of those other counties, they may end up making more money. So there's reasons that you really can't blame someone if they get an offer and go somewhere else.

RS: Regarding the Columbia County Sheriff's new, future Citizens Advisory Board, what is the most important issue you want them to know?

AM: What I want them to know, once they get picked, I think the most important thing is for them to come in and meet with the Sheriff and I and the jail staff and take a tour of the jail. I mean a very detailed tour, not just a look at it. Let's get into the weeds, let's show them how we operate the facility, and show them our budget, line by line. What's very important here is they must understand what we are required to do by law. That's one area where citizens sometimes don't understand. There have been questions like, "Why do you have to feed them all that food? Why do they get this, why do they get that?" It's because on most of this stuff, is because we are required by law to provide. For instance, we're required to give them 2600 calories a day. Also the meal times have to be a certain length of time between and no greater than. We're required to check on the inmates every hour. So we have to do these and many other things, or we can be sued or given fines. So there's certain things we have to do. Then there's other things that we use to become more efficient. For example, we hear many people complain that the inmates watch cable television, however we don't pay for that and the taxpayers don't pay for that. That's purchased through the Inmate Benefit Account. That is something made up of the profit money that the inmates themselves use by spending money off their account to buy commissary items. For example, they might buy shampoo, toothbrushes, toothpaste, candy bars, or bags of chips. The profit from that money goes into the Inmate Benefit Account and by law we cannot spend that on hiring more deputies, I can't spend that money on getting regular food for the inmates. Anything that I'm required by law to provide for the inmates, I can't spend that money on. And so that money is spent on things like checkers and chess and the television sets, the cable television bill, so inmates are basically buying this for themselves. We use things like that so we don't have as many deputies just baby-sitting inmates. We also use it as a disciplinary tool. If they're doing something wrong or against the rules or against our policies, then they get disciplined and put down on a locked-down status and they get the television taken away. We can also take an entire pod's television away. And that's controlled by the Control Technician. They can turn off that television by a push of a button in the control room. So we use it as a disciplinary tool and as a baby-sitting tool. It's very effective and it actually makes us more efficient and we don't pay for it and the tax payers don't pay for it.

RS: Do you feel the Citizens Advisory Committee should be responsible to learn how things such as what you've just talked about and go out into the public and teach the public about how

these things operate and how important they are as well as how efficient it makes the jail operate in the long run?

AM: I hope so, I hope what happens will be two things: one, I think that they will validate what we do because it's hard to advertise everything we do to the public because you only get so much press time, so much word space in a newspaper, letter or an article. You only get so much time on the radio and all of that only reaches just so many people. The more they can do to validate, to go in look around and say, "we looked at their systems. They're doing the best they can with what they have." To explain that that we have cut this, this and this. We have become more efficient in this, this and this area. That's one thing. The second thing is, I am all open and I know that Sheriff Dickerson is all open to any fresh ideas that anyone can see when they go there. We're open to the questions, such as "why don't you do this? Would it be cheaper if you do that?" All those questions will be answered in one of two ways; okay, let's look at that and see. Or two, we have looked at that but we can't do it because this law says that we have to do it this way, or we've looked at that and it turns out that it's cheaper to do it this way and here's why. Sheriff Dickerson and I have always been open with our staff and asked our staff that if you see something that you think would save us money, or save the tax payer money, then you owe it to yourself and the Sheriff's Office to come forward and tell us what that is. And they have done this and there are certain things that have been implemented and have saved money and others we've researched and discovered that we can't do it by law or can't save money. So we really are always open to all ideas.

RS: Dave Hanlon is a design consultant who has worked on this facility and the Tillamook facility. He's audited and concluded that the Columbia County Jail is, "a model of efficiency." Do you think you can still go in there and tighten some screws?

AM: When we're at full staff, we can use more control technicians which are on a different pay scale than a deputy. However when you get so low, you use your staff so often for overtime to call them in. So it made more sense for us to cut the control tech positions first, from the deputy positions for two reasons: one is, I can use that deputy not just in the control room but I can use them in booking, and I can also use them as roving and we invest a lot of training dollars in deputies because they have to go to get certified in the academy. And we're paying them the whole time they're in the academy and we're paying them to go for all this extra training. So if we have to lay off a deputy, then once we hire a new deputy to replace that person a few years later, we're going to have to reinvest those same dollars to train that person.

RS: What I'm hearing is, there's considerable money being spent retraining new deputies simply because the deputies that have just been trained with Columbia County taxpayers dollars, get laid off because of budgetary issues, or they flee to other counties from fear of losing their jobs -- and understandably so -- every few years when there's a levy crisis on the ballot. I also understand that none of this is configured into the regular expenses in the jail budget. So essentially, Columbia County is actually paying to certify deputies for other counties. We train them, fail to pass a levy which keeps them employed, -- accept this last one of course -- then other counties swoop in and hire them. That becomes a great value for those counties because they don't have

to invest the money to certify those deputies because Columbia County taxpayers have already footed that bill!

AM: Right and it takes time. So during that time we're having to pay overtime to fill that spot in the schedule. So that's an added expense. But, when we get to full staff and we can bring back those control technicians -- two or three of them, one for each shift: day, night and graveyard shift -- that saves us a little bit of money because they're right on the same pay grade as a deputy. So that'll help.

RS: So these control techs aren't trained in the same way as deputies?

AM: No, they don't have state correction academy certification. They do on-the-job training and classroom training that we provide here at Columbia County Jail.

RS: Would it be possible to recoup costs by doing the same thing other counties are doing and poach their certified deputies that they have invested their county's dollars into?

AM: Well, right, we could. The problem is, it's not very appealing because we've almost shut our jail down, for one. And two, this is just a three-year levy with no permanent funding so any deputy will ask themselves, why would I want to go there (Columbia County) when I have a secure job where I'm at. Also, we don't as well as many other counties so why would they come here and make less money? So it's hard for us to get already trained corrections deputies.

RS: There are some legislative ideas being tossed around for example if inmates have health care, once they get incarcerated they would access their own health care as opposed to Columbia County having to pay for it. And, what percentage of health care money comes out of the jail budget to take care of inmates?

AM: Well, our medical contract is, ah, well we've had to adjust it again this year so I'm not exactly sure this is right, but it's around \$400,000 for just one year. That's expensive and that only gets us to a certain point. Then once we get to that point, then we have to shift additional funds in our budget. All that money does is provide us with the medical staff here at the jail. They take care as much as they can here in house; however if an inmate gets injured or sick enough to where they have to go to the hospital or see a doctor or a dentist, then that's an added cost that we can't budget for. We can't foresee what's going to happen.

RS: So the county just pays face value, out-of-pocket costs?

AM: No, we do get a negotiated rate from our contracted insurance company who provides our medical care at the jail here. So we budget, \$50,000 for unexpected things like that and that's just a guess in the wind, we don't know if we're going to go over \$50,000 or stay under. There have been years when we've gone over and others when we've stayed under. If one inmate breaks a leg in the jail somehow, if he gets into a fight or whatnot, and we have to pay for his surgery, while he's in custody then all of that is on us. And remember we're not only talking the medical bills, when they have to be transported to the hospital, we transport them and then we have to guard them 24/7 at the hospital until it's time for them to come back to the jail. So that's all on overtime, because we don't have extra deputies sitting around here at the jail. We only have a

minimum staffing at the jail so we have to call someone in on overtime (a higher pay rate) and that could be for two, three sometimes four days. And when you're talking about paying overtime 24/7, that's a lot of money! Then for our serious offenders, the maximum security inmates, it requires two deputies on overtime 24/7. So medical care is extremely expensive. So some of the legislation that they're trying to get passed, is if someone comes to the jail and they're already privately insured, currently as the situation sits right now, as soon as they walk into that jail, that insurance company drops them automatically and without any notice.

RS: And they can do that, legally?

AM: Yes they can.

RS: Even under ACA rules (Affordable Care Act)?

AM: Yes. So, remember, this is a jail, not a prison. So most of these guys that come to jail are not convicted, they are in jail awaiting trial. In America, you're innocent until proven guilty. So these insurance companies will cancel their insurance because they've only been arrested, even though they haven't been convicted of a crime. The legislation would say at least, at the bare minimum, the insurance should be required to continue coverage until they've been convicted of a crime. Sheriffs from all over the nation are trying to get this changed, it's not just an Oregon thing. The other issue is the Oregon Health Plan. When someone is on the Oregon Health Plan, and I don't know how this will effect someone on Obama-Care (ACA), but currently the Oregon Plan does the same thing. It's not like they're nicer than the insurance companies. As soon as you come in that door, the state says why should we pay for it when the county is responsible for it? So everyone is pushing it on the local county. An all of this come right out of the local county sheriff's budget. It's an expensive deal.

RS: It took Lane County about 13 times to pass a jail levy for funding and Josephine County is completely irresponsible as citizens to pay for their own public safety. What does it say about Columbia County when they realize that their back is up against the wall, they step up and do the right thing to be responsible for their own public safety and keep their children safe on our streets.

AM: Well I think finally, we've gotten our message out to enough people, ah, it's been pretty much the same message. Two things made a big difference: first one is that after the November levy failed, and that was the first jail levy because prior to that they were patrol levies and patrol was the focus because we are so understaffed on patrol, and when November failed and we said, look if we don't pass this the jail is actually going to close. We talked to city government officials, the chiefs of police, I think they finally got it and they realized, yea, it's real. They really don't have the money, they really are going to shut the jail down. And so they got involved and they pushed it in their individual cities. I think chiefs of police were more involved in supporting this levy than in past levies. I think that mayor's, they have endorsed past levies, but this time they were actually out helping to campaign and the same with some city council members and finance directors for the cities. Because they understood it's going to impact their cities. Judges, circuit court judges, justice court judges were helping, in fact some of the circuit court judges actually walked and did canvassing and so that helped. I think the other thing to is

that after November a group of citizens came forward and said, we can't let this happen. We have one more shot in May or this is going to cost us even more money later. So they formed the political action committee and they did the campaign and instead of it coming from county government saying we need more money, it came from a group of citizens saying, we can't let this jail close. I think this helped validate the message, although the message was the same.

RS: Clatsop County, as far as I understand, needs a new jail. What about the idea of teaming up with them and rent them some of our beds in our jail? Do we really need two jails in adjoining counties? And our jail is actually a state-of-the-art jail. Why couldn't that work?

AM: Well it probably could work, if everybody got together and sat down and discussed it and got on the same page. You know there's politics involved there, you've got two sets of county commissioners, you have two sheriffs. I've been in their jail, it's small. They rent beds currently from Tillamook County. Currently the Clatsop County Sheriff thinks it's a little distance for them to transport to and from St. Helens to Astoria. That may or may not be true, depending on how often their transports are needed. A lot of that stuff can be studied and looked at, but we've offered. Columbia County has offered.

RS: Oh, you have?

AM: Yes. They're not interested at this time because of the length of the transport. I think that conversation will continue to happen. I think it would work. I think if we sat down and put it on paper, and talked about it. It might cost, we might have to buy a transport van. So that might be \$50,000, between the two counties. And we may have to, between the two counties, hire and extra person to do transport. To drive back and forth. But I think still it would be cheaper than building a new jail in Clatsop County. But what I don't know is, how many beds do they think they need? Are they in need of one hundred beds? Is that why they need a new jail? We don't have a hundred beds for them. Especially when we go back up to one hundred local beds. But there's a lot of questions and I do think there's a good possibility it could work out to benefit both counties.

RS: Undersheriff Andy Moyer, thank you for spending your time with me and citizens of Columbia County to address the issues of the Sheriff's Department, in particular the recently passed jail levy.

AM: Yep, you're always welcomed.