

Sheriff Candidates Differ on New Jail, Priorities

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The next sheriff of Scott County, who will be chosen by voters on March 6, will face some important issues. The River Cities' Reader asked current Davenport Police Chief and former Sheriff Mike Bladel and Interim Sheriff Richard Huff what they thought were the most pressing issues facing the person who takes the job over the next four years. They identified three key issues:

- **Jail overcrowding.** After a \$48 million bond referendum to build a new jail was soundly rejected by Scott County voters in 1998, the Community Jail & Alternatives Committee was formed to make a recommendation on how the county should deal with its growing jail population. Because of a population cap imposed by the Iowa Department of Corrections, the county began shipping inmates to facilities in other counties, spending \$210,000 in the fiscal year ended June 30. The county also began implementing measures designed to reduce the population, including a court-compliance program and a case expediter. "I don't see any of the programs as a permanent solution," Huff said. "It's going to be the major issue." The Community Jail & Alternatives Committee (of which the sheriff is a voting member) is expected to release a recommendation in early 2002.

- **Budget.** Governments always have limited funds, but that could be exacerbated by a measure in the Iowa legislature that would freeze property taxes. While nearly everybody in law enforcement would like to add officers, money frequently makes that impossible. And the next sheriff might actually face budget cuts. "We might have to have fewer services," Huff said.

- **Courthouse security.** With the county moving forward with a plan to remodel the courthouse, the building will house only court and law-enforcement functions. Some components of the remodeling are designed to increase security, but the new sheriff will have the opportunity to institute additional measures.

The *Reader* then interviewed the four candidates for sheriff, asking them about each of these issues as well as their goals, qualifications, and leadership skills.

Kevin Murphy, Democrat

Commander, Administrative Division of Internal Affairs, Davenport Police Department

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• **Jail overcrowding.** “I believe a lot of the remedies are already in place,” said the 44-year-old Murphy, citing case-expedition and recent changes to state law that made some crimes – such as driving with a suspended license – simple misdemeanors, therefore not subject to incarceration. He added that it’s up to the public to decide whether a new jail should be built. “The role of the sheriff should be one of mediator, representing law-enforcement needs balanced with those of the community to find the common ground between the two,” he said. “Law enforcement’s needs should be met but not overburden the community.” Murphy stressed that diversion programs must be cost-effective and should not jeopardize public security. He added that volunteer programs might help people incarcerated for long periods of time without any cost to taxpayers.

• **Budget.** Murphy said the county should explore using private-sector vendors to perform some statutory services, such as delivering subpoenas. “Those issuing the subpoenas would pay the cost,” he said. In addition, “it might be prudent to confine the department’s activities to just what is required by law and nothing more,” he said. Murphy said the most important parts of the sheriff’s office are the jail staff, criminal-investigation unit, and basic public-safety services. “We should examine the department’s specialized services, look at what the county has invested, and make decisions that maximize dollars without compromising safety in anyway,” he said.

• **Courthouse security.** “I think the current security is very good already,” Murphy said. He added that he would not support additional measures such as “electronic monitoring because I think the system we have in place is perfectly adequate. Such equipment and devices are expensive and we do not need to burden taxpayers with the additional cost.”

• **Goals.** “My goal for the Scott County Sheriff’s Department is to bring a higher level of professionalism through accreditation, which would impose national standards to the office,” Murphy said. The candidate added that he wants to “bring all the law enforcement agencies together to work for the common good.” In addition, he’s pushing for the creation of an Eastern Iowa Training Center that could bring in experts to train personnel for all local law-enforcement agencies. Such a center could also facilitate communication and sharing between law-enforcement agencies. “By identifying and sharing individual expertise across agency disciplines, we could realize a huge savings,” he said.

• **Experience and leadership.** Murphy has been a member of the Davenport Police Department since 1977. “I have experience working with every level of government in the community, and with multiple agencies within the context of law enforcement from child-abuse advocacy to site commander of dignitary protection,” he said. Murphy also noted his education background as one of his strengths. “I am a certified instructor for the FBI and I teach a course in Police Ethics,” he said. “Our jobs cause us to see some of the worst things in life, and it’s tough. ... Police Ethics reminds us that doing the right thing makes a huge difference in this profession. In other words, it is a reminder of what we already know.”

Dennis Conard, Republican

Chief Deputy, Scott County Sheriff’s Office

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- **Jail overcrowding.** The 49-year-old Conard favors moving the county toward a “direct supervision” model of incarceration, in which inmates are kept in small groups supervised by individual staff members instead of being warehoused. The current jail was “built like a zoo,” he said. The direct-supervision model is meant to increase contact between inmates and staff and increase security. “The future is in direct supervision,” Conard said. Implementing that model would require a new or expanded jail facility, but “the final decision is up to the voters of Scott County,” he said. In the meantime, Conard said he would take a cooperative role in the Community Jail & Alternatives Committee and would actively support the committee’s recommendation, even if he disagreed with it.

- **Budget.** Conard said the easiest cut to make would be to absorb the four-person community-oriented-policing unit into the regular patrol division. The candidate said that the shift would be natural because he plans to make community-oriented policing the philosophy of the entire department. Conard said he favors keeping multi-agency task forces, and the department cannot cut down on duties mandated by state law. That means any other service or staff cuts would have to come from patrol and investigation units, those functions not required by statute.

- **Courthouse security.** The candidate favors security measures included in the county’s remodeling plan, including a single public entrance and corridor reconfiguration that keeps inmates and the public separate when inmates are being transported from the jail to courtrooms.

- **Goals.** Conard says that his major goal is “to build on the firm foundation we have in place” in the sheriff’s department. He says he wants to expand the department’s expertise, track trends, and put “a greater emphasis on community-oriented policing.” That philosophy involves cross-training deputies to solve problems rather than simply refer cases to the investigative unit. While deputies are presently rotated into the department’s small community-policing unit, Conard wants to “ingrain that philosophy throughout the sheriff’s department.” The candidate wants to use the current rotation and increased training to make community-oriented policing more prevalent.

- **Experience and leadership.** Conard has worked in or overseen every division of the sheriff’s office in his 27 years with the department. He has a Bachelor of Arts from St. Ambrose University and has done master’s work in education and law-enforcement. He has also received training at the FBI National Academy. “All of that builds together,” he said.

Patrick J. Gibbs, Independent

Police Officer, Davenport Police Department
Member, Scott County Board of Supervisors

- **Jail overcrowding.** The former Davenport mayor noted that the county’s jail population has been 50 people below its cap for five months. In the short term, he said, there’s no need for a new jail facility. But he would not say when a new or expanded facility might be needed. “How long before we need the next one? I don’t know,” he said. Gibbs said that the sheriff has “a strong influence” on the Community Jail & Alternatives Committee but stressed that the committee’s recommendation will be just that. “The board’s going to make that decision” on whether to build a new jail, he said. Gibbs added that he does not want to see any inmates housed out-of-county and said he doubts the jail population can be lowered further with

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additional or expanded diversion programs.

- **Budget.** Gibbs claimed the sheriff has an advisory role with the county Board of Supervisors, and that line-item budget cuts would be its decision. “Clearly, the county Board of Supervisors would have the final say,” he said. But he asserted that a property-tax freeze would not necessitate cuts because the county has been financially responsible. Gibbs said that the patrol division will be his top budgetary priority.

- **Courthouse security.** Gibbs does not support security measures beyond those included in the county’s renovation plan. Security is “clearly one of the goals” of turning the building into a law center, he said.

- **Goals.** Gibbs’ major goal is to increase the number of patrol deputies. He said that some nights, the county is divided into halves, with one deputy assigned to each half. The result is an unacceptable response time. “We need to double the number of deputies on the street at night,” he said. Gibbs said that would take officers away from some of the office’s state-mandated functions – such as serving people with civil papers – and reorganize the department, including putting more command staff on patrol duties. Furthermore, he said he would seek out grant money, such as the federal COPS program. “That funding is going to remain available,” he said. Gibbs said that as mayor, he increased the number of police officers on the street by 15 without raising taxes.

- **Experience and leadership.** The 42-year-old Gibbs has spent 16 years with the Davenport Police Department and cites his intergovernmental experience as a key qualification for being a sheriff. He noted his experience with the Bi-State Gang Task Force and Davenport Gang Task Force and said that he’s familiar working with the federal government because he was mayor during the 1993 flood. Gibbs originally sought the Republican nomination for sheriff but declared himself an independent when Conard was given the nod.

Lamar E. Lucas, Independent

Director of Security, Jumer’s Casino Rock Island

- **Jail overcrowding.** The 58-year-old Lucas favors expanding diversion programs further before considering building or expanding the county jail. “We need to be sure all the alternatives are explored,” he said, including home detention and pre-trial release. He also said the legislature needs to re-classify some felonies as misdemeanors so that offenders don’t spend time in jail. He added that alternatives to incarceration will not solve the county’s jail-population problem. “There’s definitely going to be a housing problem,” he said. Once all alternatives are exhausted, the county should assess what its short-term – 10- to 15-year – needs are and build or expand the jail to meet them. He favors a direct-supervision model that can be expanded periodically. Lucas said that he would not actively campaign for public support of the Community Jail & Alternatives Committee recommendation if he disagreed with it.

- **Budget.** Lucas said he might reduce the number of deputies in special units, such as those dealing with gang crime. “We need special units, but maybe I would limit the number of people I had in them,” he said. Lucas added that increased public trust that comes from expanded

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community-oriented policing might offset the damage of any cuts.

- **Courthouse security.** “You have to increase the security in the courthouse,” Lucas said. Adding metal detectors at the public entrance “just has to be done. ... I don’t think it’s that big of an expense.”

- **Goals.** “The department is a very good department,” Lucas said. “I want to make it better.” The candidate said he wants to expand community-oriented policing so that patrol deputies can close cases or at least take them farther before handing them off to the investigative unit. The current community-oriented-policing program is “very limited,” he said. Lucas also said he wants to increase the number of uniformed officers and increase training.

- **Experience and leadership.** Lucas served in the sheriff’s department from 1968 to 1976 and cites his private-sector business experience as a major difference between him and the other candidates. “I say I have a multi-level perspective on the job,” he said. “I think I can bring a new perspective to the sheriff’s office.” In addition to being director of security at Jumer’s Casino Rock Island, Lucas has also worked as a regional manager for an armored-car company. Lucas was a Republican but became an independent prior to announcing his candidacy for sheriff.