

County Police v. the Elected Sheriff

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The issue of county police v. the elected sheriff is primarily a political issue. The most often used argument put forth by the proponents of county police is cost efficiency and better accountability.

Cost Efficiency

The argument that creating a county police force will save the taxpayer money is on its very face absurd. To accept this notion requires one to ignore some basic “truths”.

First, the creation of a county police force does not mean an end to the sheriff’s office. Indeed, the county must continue to fund the sheriff’s office, which still must serve as an arm of the courts for security and service of court papers. If the sheriff runs the jail, this responsibility remains within his office, so long as he wishes to retain it. Therefore, funding of the sheriff’s office will continue.

Second, the creation of a county police force will mean new expenditures – some on a one-time basis and others reoccurring. New cars, new uniforms, new office space, new personnel, i.e. a new chief, deputy chief and command staff, as well as new road officers. It is foolish to think that all these people can or will be drawn from existing sheriff’s personnel.

Third, who will handle communications? There could easily be two communications systems, one for the sheriff’s office and another for the county police.

In short, there can be no savings to the taxpayers by dividing the duties of the sheriff’s office and creating a county police. Savings usually come from consolidation of agencies and efforts, not from the opposite, and even then such savings are small if realized at all.

Better Accountability

As for the second argument of accountability, the notion that more will be brought to a county police department defies logic and historical fact.

With the elected sheriff, everyone knows exactly who is in charge and therefore responsible and accountable. That is why when anyone calls a sheriff; they generally get to speak directly to him. The sheriff knows how he got in office; who put him there; and what he must do to stay there. He must, by design, be responsive and accountable to the public. That is why you have the elected office of sheriff.

The county police force is headed by a chief hired by whom? Council? The County Administrator? The Chairman of Council? In any of these cases, the chief is obligated not to the

citizens of the county, but to whoever hired him. He works simply put, at the pleasure of a majority of council members who control that decision by either: (1) controlling the administrator himself who works for them; (2) controlling the council chairman who they supported for the position he holds; (3) controlling enough votes on council to determine such issues as employment and discharge of county employees. So the chief is accountable to anyone except the citizens of the county at large. What does this mean?

It will invariably mean interference and intrusion by the council or administrator, acting as their representative, in the day-to-day operations of the agency. Everything from personnel decision (hirings and promotions and firings) to work schedules will be subject to their influence or direct interference. You cannot operate a police agency by committee, and that's what you'll have.

When something goes wrong, who will the public look to for accountability? The Chief? Council? The Administrator? In short, there will be finger pointing accusations and recriminations resulting in the chief being terminated or disciplined, but the real problem, interference, will likely continue.

The bottom line isn't and should not be money and promises of savings. First of all there are none, the real issue is accountability and administrative control.

The argument must be put to you, the people, in that vain. Do the people want one man, elected by a majority of themselves to whom they can look to for leadership and accountability, or do they want a convoluted system where the chief of police has only that authority and power the council wishes to give him? He may have all the responsibility, but none of the authority to meet it. That's the real issue, and it all comes down to control. Who's in charge? If the answer is county council, then rest assured there will be less accountability, increased interference and more money spent. Once council becomes responsible and legally liable for the county police department, money will follow to properly fund the new police agency in ways never seen with most sheriffs' offices.