21st KZGN News Talking Points Editorial

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Today’s topic: Sheriff Says He Wants To Close The Ridgecrest Jail

Kern County is taking a hit in tax revenue due to low gas and oil prices. We all know that if the price of gas and oil gets too low, producers in the U.S. finally reach a point where it’s not profitable to keep bringing in more oil at a loss. We all understand that. Now, when the oil companies’ income goes down, so does Kern County’s tax revenue. With the current estimated numbers from Kern County staff, supervisors voted to cut all department budgets. The sheriff is going to lose 1% of his $116 million budget, or approximately a $1.2 million cut.

To save an estimated $500K, he has decided it would be prudent to cut the sheriff-run jail facility in Ridgecrest.

Now let’s consider that $500K savings. How about calculating against those the savings that the city pays almost $300K of that cost!!! Yes, we pay, with our tax dollars, $300K of that supposed $500K cost to have a jail here in Ridgecrest. With us paying more than half the cost for the jail in Ridgecrest, his own officers have the benefit of having the facility here as well. Do you think the county will then tell the city, “Don’t worry about that $300K you pay us now. Just keep paying it, and we’ll take care of your prisoners in Mojave for the same price.”?

As the church lady used to say on Saturday Night Live, “Well, isn’t that special?!” I always loved that segment on SNL.

Let’s get back to this editorial. Then, add to that, if it closes, then our officers and even his deputies based in the Indian Wells Valley, will have to transport prisoners to the Mojave jail. He’s quoted saying that’s it’s only a 1 hour drive. Sure, but how about the loss of availability of that officer because that adds up to 2 hours for a round trip. For a single shift, we lose the availability of an officer to respond to citizen requests for service for almost 20% of their total shift. This would apply to the sheriff’s own deputies, as well. They have fewer officers, and a lot larger area to provide service to, and the people living in the county areas would also lose officer availability for 2 hours.

Let’s try and analyze a longer affect. It should be noted that arresting and booking a criminal into jail is not high on the list of things an officer likes to do. However, they do it because it’s their job. If the jail does close, what if, in order for the city to not suffer the loss of 2 hours of officer available service time, there could be a tendency to not arrest the bad guys? To just cite and release them back into the community to just break more laws, just to save the cost of a 2-hour trip to Mojave. I guess there was some concern from the supervisors concerning this. The idea has kind of been tabled for now.

However, in the meeting, he said it is just a band-aid problem that will be a million dollar problem when they start doing next fiscal year’s budget. Our police department handles over 21,000 calls for service every year. That’s an average of 57 calls for service every day, of every week, for the whole year. As a pact volunteer, that is out patrolling the community often, I see days where we have so many calls for service that the officers get backed up, and requesting citizens have to wait longer than they like. Often this happens when officers are tied up booking criminals into the jail here and not 2 hours away.

A real big point here is that even though an officer is tied up booking someone here at the Ridgecrest jail, if a bad incident did happen, they are still available right now to come back out and support the community. If they are 2 hours away, that important flexibility goes completely away. Just think back just a few months ago, when we had a man kill 2 people, then drive through town shooting out his windows at random, leading officers on a high-speed chase that eventually wound up way down route 395 before he was finally stopped; or how about the nut that just started shooting a rifle through the walls of his camper out at the fairgrounds? What if we had officers out of town booking someone? We need our officers here. We need the jail to stay open here in Ridgecrest. Think about it.

In conclusion, I don’t know about you, but I’d rather have officers here in town available to provide protection for us, not an hour away in Mojave. Again, I am bringing an issue to all of your attention. Is this what you want your officers doing? Spending hours out of town, not available to support us here if needed? Again, I say get involved. If you don’t like this proposed cut, let Supervisor Mick Gleason know. Let Sheriff Youngblood know. Let the mayor and city council know. Speak up. Get involved. Your voice can make the difference.

And that’s today editorial. Tell me what you think! Whether you agree with me or not, I’d like to read your comments. I encourage your email comments. Please email them to [info@kzgn.net](mailto:INFO@KZGN.NET). This has been a KZGN talking points editorial. Join me next Tuesday for my next editorial. I’m Tom Wiknich, and that’s what I think!