

Walton County Grand Jury Jail Inspection Report

August 2015 – January 2016 Term

Tour – December 18, 2015:

Members of the Grand Jury met with staff members of the Walton County Jail including but not limited to Sheriff Joe Chapman, Chief Deputy Keith Brooks, and Jail Commander Major Wade Harris. Our visit started in the Sheriff's office with Sheriff Chapman, Deputy Brooks, and Major Harris. The meeting lasted for approximately 45 minutes. Sheriff Chapman gave a brief history of the jail and we discussed issues the jail will face in the future. One has to admire Sheriff Chapman for his frank and honest discussions regarding the facility and his attempts to make improvements.

Major Harris conducted the tour of the jail which took approximately 1 hour 30 minutes. The Walton County jail staff is commended for their dedication. Everyone we came into contact with was extremely passionate about their job and well versed in their duties.

We were given a fairly extensive tour of the jail with an explanation of how inmates are treated from the moment they enter the jail. We were also taken on a tour of facilities for those who qualify for work release programs.

We sincerely appreciate the time the Sheriff and his staff took out of their day to accommodate the Grand Jurors.

Statistical Data:

In a jail that can hold 376 individuals, the jail, on the date of our tour held 315 people in custody. There is a separate area for male inmates and female inmates. Per Sheriff Chapman, if a jail is at 80% capacity then it is considered to be at full capacity. Provisions have been made to house overflow inmates in other Georgia counties such as Oglethorpe and Morgan counties at a cost paid by Sheriff Chapman. There are currently 64 inmates in minimum security for violations ranging from DUI, failing to pay child support, and probation violations. Generally, inmates under minimum security are not considered dangerous to themselves or any other individual in the jail. Approximately 60-65% of the inmates in custody are individuals who have violated their probation requirements.

Needed Improvements

The jail is currently under staffed. Most of the candidates that apply are either not qualified or less than ideal by Sheriff Chapman's standards. In addition the compensation for members of the sheriff's department can make it difficult to attract the best talent unlike surrounding counties which can afford to compensate employees at a higher rate of pay. This is an issue county leaders should focus on to attract a better pool of talent.

The evidence storage facility was well organized but much too small for the needs of the county. The current area is over flowing while new evidence is coming in every day.

FILED IN OPEN COURT  
This 29<sup>th</sup> day of January 2016  
at 12:45 am

Kathy K. Frost scanned  
Clerk, Walton Superior Court

COPY SENT TO Kathy + DA's office

The holding area for inmates who are on suicide watch needs improvement. Even though the area is comprised of a padded cell area, it needs to be remodeled with more/new padding. Over the years the padding has been worn down. The current padding does not seem sufficient.

In our ever changing world the jail should be prepared for new mandates as they occur. Currently the jail has no place to house transsexual inmates. Although the jail has separate facilities for male and female, transsexuals cannot be housed with either.

One striking observation is the new wing of the jail was designed poorly and has been a source of consternation for the jail staff. The new wing was designed in such a manner as to make viewing of inmates and their activities difficult. This is frustrating to staff members involved with monitoring and insuring a safe environment. It also poses a hazard to inmates who may do harm to themselves and others. In addition, there is an overabundance of unusable hallway space.

Additional cells are needed to prevent the need for housing inmates in other counties. The county not only has to pay for the housing but also to transport the inmates back to Walton County for court appearances.

### New Facility

In 2011 the voters of Walton County approved a SPLOST which included plans for a new jail. Of the \$40 million expected to be collected for county use 63% or \$25.2 million was budgeted to be used for jail expansion. As of the yearend financial reports dated June 30, 2015 only \$1,234.00 had been spent on jail expansion.

The Grand Jury of February-July 2013 made a recommendation to purchase land at Highway 78 and Cherry Hill Drive for the site of a new jail. This was one of four properties the county was considering for purchase at the time. At this point nothing has been done in regard to jail expansion or construction.

It is the recommendation of this Grand Jury that the next Grand Jury form an investigative committee to determine what the plans are for SPLOST funds being collected and insure they are being spent as presented to the voters in 2011.

### Overview

The inmates are treated in a humane and professional manner. The facility was exceptionally clean on the day of our visit. The staff is friendly and has to be admired for working in conditions in which they must be constantly vigilant to protect inmates, other staff members, and themselves.

This was an enlightening and educational visit. All citizens should be given the opportunity to visit the jail to gain an appreciation for the professionalism exhibited by members of the Sheriff's office on a day-to-day basis.

The employees of the Walton County Sheriff's Office deserve the total support of Walton County residents and the very best tools available to keep themselves and everyone in Walton County safe and protected.

Michael Fowler

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Fowler", written in a cursive style.

Foreman