

## **Mason County Sheriff's Department Says "Reductions In Sheriff's Staff Will Negatively Affect Public Safety"**

### **Local News**

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**SHELTON, Wash.** - Commissioners are expected to ask the Sheriff to cut \$382,111 from its already threadbare 2009 budget at the Commission Meeting to be held on April 14. Layoffs are expected to take place on April 15, 2009. According to Sheriff Casey Salisbury, cuts of this magnitude will mean cutting as many as five deputies from the patrol division. "Anytime we have to take deputies off the street, response times will increase and so will crime." Salisbury went on to say "At the end of 2008 we had just started to turn the corner on the horrific crime rate in our community. We were able to establish programs such as the Drug K-9, a Special Operations and Narcotics Unit, an enhanced Search and Rescue Unit, and a Traffic Unit. Those programs have been making a difference. For the first time in over 20 years, we were able to take the offense against crime rather than just react to it." Mason County has the highest non-urban violent crime rate and burglary rate in the State of Washington. Please remember that the Sheriff's Office has already made cuts in an attempt to address the reductions in revenue in the county. As of January 1, 2009 three civilian employees and one deputy were laid off due to budget cuts. Additionally the Jail was not allowed to fill one open position. Along with the patrol deputy, those positions included one animal control officer, an evidence officer, and a community service officer who served civil papers. Additionally, two deputies were moved into state grant funded positions to offset budget reductions so the Sheriff could avoid laying them off. Serving civil papers is a constitutionally mandated function of the Sheriff. The layoffs we have experienced have caused uniformed officers and even command staff to absorb an additional 200 hrs per week in mandated functions along with their normal duties. For example, Sheriff Salisbury, the Undersheriff, and Chief Deputies are routinely out in the community serving civil process. The bottom line is that we have run out of places to cut without negatively affecting public safety.

You might hear that the sheriff is over staffed and has more deputies than the one deputy per thousand population recommended by the International Association of Police Chiefs. The fact is that we currently have 50 commissioned officers, which includes the Sheriff and Undersheriff. We police a county with a population of about 54,000 including the city of Shelton. The unincorporated population of the county is approximately 45,500. Because Mason County is a vacation destination, and because many vacationers are traveling through Mason County in the Spring and Summer, our population increases to over 100,000 at any given time during that period. For at least 6 months out of the year we are policing 100,000 people with only 50 commissioned officers. Most of our neighboring counties have multiple cities within their jurisdictions that have their own police departments. Mason County has only one municipality in the county. Therefore, when it comes to situations involving mutual aid we are again at a disadvantage. Belfair has grown to a community the size of a small city with many of the same public safety challenges. To meet these challenges a significant police presence is necessary in that area. Mason County has very unique geographic challenges. Because our county is cut up by waterways that increase the distances we have to travel, response times are increased. Another public safety challenge looming is the Hood Canal Bridge Closure which is scheduled to begin May 1, 2009, and continue for six weeks. This closure

will cause traffic volumes to nearly double on several of the state highways and county roads in Mason County. Collisions are expected to increase proportionately with the increases in traffic volume. Additionally traffic delays at key locations in the county are expected to rise significantly. While local public safety officials have made preparations and plans to deal with the closure, the state has provided no financial support for the impact. You might also hear that in 2008, the Board of County Commissioners authorized the Sheriff to hire eleven new deputies. That statement would not be accurate. Those positions were the addition of two sergeants which were converted from deputy positions (no increase in personnel). Additional personnel hired were from already existing budgeted positions that had not been filled. Two new positions were authorized by the Commission for the newly formed traffic division. Four other deputies were reassigned from patrol to the traffic unit. The traffic division was formed to cope with the State Patrol's withdrawal from county roads. Mason County and the City of Shelton have nearly the highest crime rates per capita of any jurisdictions in the State of Washington including violent crimes and property crimes. Mason County far exceeds its neighboring comparators. We believe these high crime numbers can be directly correlated to the fact that, until the last few years, public safety has not been a priority in Mason County. Not making public safety a priority led to a lack of adequate funding over many years. During those decades, Mason County acquired the reputation among the criminal element as a back-country operation that didn't aggressively pursue crime. This perception fueled the influx of undesirable elements that relocated from metropolitan areas to Mason County to pursue their criminal enterprises. Crime can be expected to increase as officers are laid off. We understand we need to make cuts. We will continue to be team players in county government. We will continue to be good stewards of the taxpayer's money. We have trimmed spending to the bone. Our Board of County Commissioners is in the unenviable position of making cuts in all sectors of county government and having to establish priorities. These cuts will result in people no longer having jobs. We certainly understand we are not exempt. When Sheriff Salisbury took office, he vowed to keep the public informed and make the Sheriff's Office operation more efficient and transparent to his constituents. Further we recognize that sometimes budgets have to be changed mid cycle because of unforeseen issues such as smaller than projected revenues or unexpected expenses. Changes to the county budget require input from the public. Accordingly, citizens that want to provide input in this process are encouraged to attend the meeting of the County Commission at 9:00 AM on April 14, 2009. Regardless of the magnitude of budget cuts, we will do our very best to give the people of our county the highest value for their tax dollar through outstanding service and continuing community partnerships. One partnership that continues to produce results is the Sheriff's Office relationship with a Shelton businessman who has provided an office space at no charge for the Special Operations Group (SOG) valued at about \$20,000. Because of this generosity, our SOG unit is able to operate away from the court house environment and efficiently conduct narcotics investigations with a high degree of confidentiality that is so important. We will continue to work with our community partners to obtain a K-9 tracking dog, and a suitable permanent office space in Belfair with a compliment of deputies to better serve our citizens with a fully functioning detachment in these tough economic times. Our office will take a leadership role in making Mason County a safe place to live, play and work.