Jail jam puts suspects on streets

By STEVE WHEELER
Advocate staff writer

The lack of jail space at the Parish Prison has resulted in dozens of felony suspects being released from the Prison during the past three weeks, a sheriff's official said.

Lt. Col. Mike Barnett said most of those released were accused of burglary, theft and other property crimes. Most of them also have drug problems, he said.

Some of the suspects were released on low bonds and some were released on their own recognizance or were signed out by family or friends, the records show.

And because of their drug problems, most of them will "immediately go to committing crimes again," Barnett predicted.

East Baton Rouge's chronic shortage of jail space has turned into an acute problem in the past few weeks, officials say.

Declining revenues and increasing costs in the sheriff's office have resulted in five consecutive years of deficit spending that wiped out large surpluses and resulted in cost-cutting measures last year.

Sheriff Elmer Litchfield said he was forced last year to close a 444-bed wing at the prison because he could not afford the 65 prison guards it takes to staff the wing.

The result was an immediate jail-space problem.

Since those cutbacks, the sheriff's office has been getting by with fewer patrols and some creative use of jail space.

The Metro Council chipped in additional money to open a part of the closed wing to house drug offenders.

But Barnett said there's simply no more room at the jail.

"The rising serious crime rate has taken away our cushion," he said.

"We're at the end of our rope. The prison being closed is handcuffing us instead of the prisoners."

The population limits for inmates at the Parish Prison is 860 men and 86 women, Barnett said.

"Every day" that limit is surpassed, Barnett said.

As of 10 a.m. Friday, for example, there were 879 men and 79 women, records show.

"We're 19 men over the limit, and 19 men will have to be released within 24 hours," Barnett said.

"We're facing the weekend at capacity."

Weekends are generally much busier than weekdays, he said.

State law mandates that prisoners can't be held longer than 24 hours in the booking area of the prison, Barnett said.

The same applies to temporary holding cells at city police precincts and other law enforcement agencies.

When the jail is full, suspects are sometimes released on the day they are arrested.

Sometimes, the people arrested are accused of more serious crimes than those already in jail.

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The prisoners deemed less dangerous are released on reduced bonds or on their own signatures, and the more serious offenders are booked into the jail.

Barnett likened the jail situation to a container full of marbles. When a marble goes in the top, one has to come out the bottom, he said.

The district court judge on duty gets to decide who stays and who goes, Barnett said.

"We give the judges a list of people we think are most bondable," Barnett said. "They get worse every time. We let the least offensive ones out. The criminals are aware of it, believe me."

"It's aggravating the crime rate. It's accelerating the crime rate," Barnett said.

It's also aggravating law enforcement officers and judges, he said.

District Judge Mike Erwin, the chief judge in criminal court, said Barnett's assessment of the jail situation is on target.

"It's full every day," Erwin said of the Parish Prison. Releasing prisoners is an "everyday occurrence," he said.

Erwin said some days are better than others, but "Every day I do have to make a decision. There's not anything we can do about it. I'm not excited about it and I don't like it. It's a problem."

The sheriff has placed a 6.9-mill property tax proposal on the Oct. 16 ballot, and is pinning his hopes on the tax passing.

"The Baton Rouge Advocate"

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Source: Payroll records of East Baton Rouge Parish Sheriff's Office.

The number of employees on the sheriff's office payroll.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Employees</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>July 1989</td>
<td>665</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1990</td>
<td>721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1991</td>
<td>716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1992</td>
<td>716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 1993</td>
<td>622</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Current fiscal year: 607

*The year the jail was expanded
**Layoffs after tax fails

The graph shows the number of employees in the sheriff's office from July 1989 to July 1993. The number of employees dropped from 721 in July 1990 to 622 in July 1993, due to layoffs after the tax fails. The current fiscal year shows 607 employees.

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