State experiences rash of jail escapes

by Wayne LeJeune

NEW IBERIA - The Iberia Parish Criminal Justice Facility isn’t the only jail in south Louisiana that experienced inmates escapes in September.

Two inmates escaped Sept. 24 from the Iberia jail by unraveling the wire on a gate surrounding an exercise yard. An inmate in the St. Tammany Parish Jail simply walked out during a supervised garbage detail on Sept. 26.

The State Police also recaptured an inmate Sept. 25 who broke out of the minimum security State Police barracks Sept. 14 in East Baton Rouge Parish.

On Wednesday, two Tangipahoa Parish sheriff’s deputies were suspended without pay leaving a trusty unsupervised outside the jail on Sept. 24.

The trusty drove off in a department vehicle.

While in the vehicle the trusty pickup up a 16-year-old girl who died a short time later when the trusty drove the vehicle off the road, hitting a culvert and then striking a utility pole.

The trusty was booked with driving while drunk, vehicular homicide, driving without a license and failing to maintain control. He originally had been convicted of theft, paroled and then placed back into jail for parole violation.

While all of the inmates in the four separate jail breaks were recaptured, Iberia Parish President Will Langlinais says keeping inmates in jail is becoming more difficult because keeping prisoners locked up is becoming more expensive.

"Inmates aren’t good people. They’re criminals and they don’t care what they do," Langlinais said. "It’s getting very expensive to operate a prison and we (Iberia Parish) are not alone in that boat. Every parish is having money problems with their jails."

Langlinais said Iberia Sheriff Errol "Rome" Romero was correct when he said the original plan for the exercise yard at the jail called for a double fence but was changed due to lack of funds.

Furthermore, Langlinais said it’s still not economically feasible to build a second fence.

"We have a six percent increase in our budget this year for the criminal justice facility," he said. "The parish council is responsible for $664,000 a year in funding for the jail and that is money we would normally spend on services to the taxpayer."

Gubernatorial candidates, depending on who’s talking, estimated the cost of housing an inmate ranges from $18,000 to $20,000 per year. Those costs include utilities, food and medical care for inmates but Langlinais said the prisoners are actually costing more.

"In our case and probably elsewhere, damages caused by the prisoners are putting a strain on prison budgets," he said. "We had $3,000 worth of glass destroyed by inmates. They’ve even destroyed a brick wall."

"They don’t care and it’s costing the taxpayers even more money," Langlinais said.

While a second fence for the jail isn’t feasible, Langlinais has met with Romero and jail warden Danny David to correct the problem with the gate.

"We’ll try to install some flat metal bars at 12-inch intervals at the gate which will be welded at the top and bottom," Langlinais said. "But keeping prisoners in jail requires keeping an eye on them."

"If we built a steel wall around that exercise yard and left prisoners unattended they’d be out there with an acetylene tank and a torch cutting a hole through it," he said.

Langlinais also said keeping inmates locked up is going to get even more expensive in the future which means taxpayers will have