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Community ▶

Sheriff reaches out to business

by John F. Schaffner

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Fulton County Sheriff Ted Jackson is still relatively new to the job, but he says he is working hard to deal with the major issues confronting the Sheriff's Office.

Those include leadership and management, making the courthouse more secure, morale issues and dealing with the operations of the beleaguered county jail.

With all that on his plate, Sheriff Jackson also realizes he needs to reach out to the community for support, which is one reason he spoke to the weekly breakfast meeting of the Buckhead Business Association on Jan. 7.

"The county jail is most of what we do," Jackson told the group of business owners. He recounted that the jail is under a consent decree related primarily to the issue of overcrowding. "The jail was built to house 1,400 inmates," he said. "The first day, we had 2,250."

He said his department made 400 more arrests in 2009 than in 2008, which has meant more demand on the jail. In fact, he told the group that 30,000 inmates come through the jail each year.

"The jail is a holding facility while inmates are awaiting trial," he explained. "One inmate has been awaiting trial in the jail for four and a half years."

Jackson told the group that the courts need to institute a program of community service sentences for inmates who are in the jail on minor charges and are first-time offenders. He said there is a pilot program presently being carried out in south Fulton County along those lines.

Jackson said the department has 600 inmates scattered around the state in jails to avoid the overcrowding problem. When he took office, the county was paying at least \$68 per



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day for each inmate sequestered in jails around the state. He has managed to reduce that to about \$30 per day through outsourcing and renegotiating contracts.

He also commented on negotiations for the county to buy the City of Atlanta's jail, "which will solve the jail problems short term," he said. The city wants to get out of the business of running a jail facility and would apparently pay the city to house its prisoners while they await trial.

Jackson said he has produced a courthouse security plan, citing the need for a command center and updated technology, which he said the department can't get because of budget problems. He said he presently is going through the budget process and knows he will have to make further cuts in his department.

He said the mission of his department is to fill the law-enforcement voids. To that end, he has facilitated meetings the second week of each month with 15 police chiefs in the county. He also holds informal meetings with members of the media.

One of the programs he is most proud of is the department's outreach program, dealing with youth offenders and working with chaplains in the community and in the jail. He said 600 inmates have signed up for a technical training program he has created in partnership with Atlanta Technical College to attempt to teach the inmates a useful trade so they will not become repeat offenders.

"Every inmate saved is \$72 a day saved for Fulton County taxpayers," Jackson stated.

In order to deal with the problems associated with increased costs of operations and reduced budgets, Jackson said he is hoping to start a Sheriff's Foundation. He said that is one reason he appreciated the opportunity to talk to Buckhead's business leaders. He said he will be calling on those at the meeting to support that foundation.

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