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Volusia resolution opposes state on changing pretrial services program

By ANDREW GANT, Staff writer 

DELAND -- This area's top prosecutor, public defender, chief judge and sheriff all agree on at least one thing: The local pretrial services program works.

"There's no reason to change it," Volusia County Sheriff Ben Johnson told the County Council on Thursday, speaking in support of Councilwoman Joie Alexander's resolution to oppose any state changes to the program. "This is a local issue, that's where it belongs, that's where it needs to stay, and the Florida Sheriffs Association stands behind you."

Johnson (the newly elected president of that group), State Attorney R.J. Larizza, Public Defender Jim Purdy and Chief Judge William Parsons each came to Thursday's County Council meeting to hail the program, which Alexander said averted deep cuts last year and faces them again in 2012.

The council unanimously approved the resolution and plans to give the local legislative delegation a three- or four-hour tour of the system sometime in the coming weeks.

"This program deserves to stay in this community," County Manager Jim Dinneen said. "It is under attack."

The pretrial system in Volusia County is one of five accredited programs in Florida, and it supervised about 5,200 cases in 2010. It's responsible for things like providing a judge with criminal background information on a defendant and monitoring the ones who are released on certain conditions rather than bail money.

The majority of people supervised under the program are first-time offenders charged with nonviolent crimes.

Proponents say the system saves the county money -- about \$3 million a year in jail inmate costs -- and helps prevent overcrowding, to which the jail is precariously close.

Recently proposed bills have included provisions that would slash participation. Sen. Ellyn Bogdanoff, R-Fort Lauderdale, filed a bill that would have limited the program to people who are indigent. It also called for private bail bondsmen be used "to the greatest extent possible."

"We have taken a strong stand to oppose the legislation that would prevent counties from deciding what kind of pretrial services program they are going to have," Purdy said.

A recent county study found 1.4 percent of people placed in the pretrial supervision program failed to appear in court, compared to 3.3 percent of people who were released after posting bail.

"The pretrial services program not only saves money and helps the jail run more efficiently, but it also enhances public safety," Larizza said.

Corrections Director Marilyn Chandler Ford said the Branch Jail has only 43 open beds and "a reduction, elimination or even a delay (in the program) is going to fill jail beds.

"Crowding creates management problems in the jail," she said. "It also raises constitutional issues ... and it certainly means jail construction."

The county has estimated it would cost \$35 million to expand the jail by 500 beds.

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