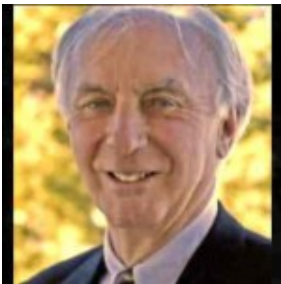


A tour of county jail can be eye-opening

By Ted Long

I attended the second session of the Citizens Academy on Monday where we were introduced to the county jail and the communications center. For those of you just joining the discussion, I have been accepted as a member of the El Dorado County Sheriff's Citizens Academy, a 16-week program to inform and enlighten county residents of the operation of the sheriffs' department.

This week, as with our last instructors, were very friendly and longtime county employees; average time 25 years. The county jail session lead by Tim McClain and the communication section by Kathy Jacobs, both, as I have said very nice people.



Ted Long

In the communication we heard about the 911 system and the county's emergency number, which should be used for police emergencies within the county – (530) 626.4911. If you call 911, your call is first sent to the highway patrol in Sacramento then rerouted to the county system. By law your call may only be transferred once to protect you from hang-ups or other technical problems that may be encountered during a failed transfer.

The more interesting discussion was about the changes in the county jail. While the building is not new, it is in fine condition, all concrete and stainless steel and very clean. While it does not extend a particularly strong welcoming feeling, it does look secure, a place where someone could disappear forever if it were used to silence dissent or disagreement, and a good reason to make it available for inspection by the public and organizations such as the grand jury.

The population problem is very large and growing. With the state system under federal control, many serious offenders are now being sent to county jails. It used to be that a one-year term was the maximum. For the county system, now they have prisoners serving as much as 15 years.

McClain told us that while most of the inmates are in for various crimes the real reason is drugs, and the need to raise the money to support their habit. It seems the "war on drugs" has filled our jails. One can only wonder if some drugs were legal, and the crime taken out of them, would we all not be better off? The addicted not subject to the high cost that illegality forces on them, and perhaps more important, the reduction in crime to the rest of us. Sounds a lot like the unexpected consequences of attempts to make alcohol illegal and cure society's woes with laws of the '20s to me. A lot of average people suffering while a lot of criminals got rich.

Everyone should experience the impact of jail. It's one of those areas where we need to remain vigilant, as most have no idea of the possibility and the impact of isolation within this concrete structure.

Ted Long is a resident of South Lake Tahoe, former City Council member and has been on the El Dorado County Grand Jury.