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Rumors drive deputies to consider union

By [Molly Moorhead](#), Times Staff Writer

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Pasco County jail deputies may be close to holding a vote on whether to unionize, a move fueled, at least in part, by a rumor that the county might consider privatizing the jail.

The county, by all accounts, is not considering turning over jail operations to a private entity.

But commissioners and Sheriff Bob White have been fielding questions from deputies worried about their jobs.

In the meantime, the Police Benevolent Association has been collecting signatures from jail deputies expressing interest in unionizing, executive director David Murrell said. It needs at least 30 percent of eligible employees to sign cards before setting an election.

"We've far exceeded that," Murrell said.

The PBA's move comes about a year after jail staffers voted out another collective bargaining unit that had been representing them, the Fraternal Order of Police, which still represents Pasco's road deputies.

White has had a strained relationship with the FOP since the union formed in 2006. The two sides went through multiple rounds of bitter contract talks, deadlocking over issues like medical insurance for retirees and discipline appeals.

In 2008, as White was running for re-election, union literature criticized his spending decisions and his public support of the revenue-cutting Amendment 1. In March 2008, the sheriff broke an impasse with the deputies and supervisors units when he imposed a labor contract. The union challenged his authority to do so, and a state agency recently sided with the deputies.

That same month, jail deputies voted 132-62 to drop their FOP representation, which allowed them to be solicited by the PBA.

White, before entering politics, was a board member for the Florida Police Benevolent Association, whose backing helped him defeat then-Sheriff Lee Cannon. The PBA's current lobbyist in Tallahassee is Ed Collins, a former county commissioner and top ally of White's.

Collins told the *Times* he is not involved in organizing labor groups and has no knowledge of the PBA coming to the jail.

White said he's staying out of it.

"I've always had the stance that I will never stand in the way of those that want to govern themselves," he said.

He met with jail staff last week to deliver his response to the swirling rumor: he is opposed to "the P word."

"I've explained to them that privatization is not a good deal for Pasco County because it's more expensive," he said.

"I've told them that I would do everything in my power to keep that from happening."

Commissioner Michael Cox also said he has received calls from a handful of jail deputies fretting about privatization.

"They've heard the rumor, and I've told them that's not the case," Cox said. "We don't have any plans to do any of that. The sheriff is in charge of running the jail, and I want it to stay that way."

Privatization hasn't been floated at recent budget hearings, in which the county is trying to make up a \$35-million deficit. No one is on the record in favor of it.

So where did the rumor start?

Cox said he asked the callers where they had heard it. Their reply, he said: from White.

The sheriff said he heard it originated with the commission.

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COMING SUNDAY

The Pasco County jail is a money pit. Though the real toll is in ruined lives, the cost to taxpayers is more than \$60,000 every day. And it's growing, with a new wing opening this month. To see what Pasco taxpayers are getting for their money, the *St. Petersburg Times* took a snapshot of the jail, its operations and its population, on a typical day.

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