

Sheriff's request ignites battle

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With significant budget cuts looming this fall, Pasco County commissioners and Sheriff Bob White are at odds over how best to seek Pasco's part of \$1 billion in federal stimulus funds aimed at law enforcement.

At the heart of the dispute is the question of how the county should use the federal dollars: Should the money go only to hire new deputies or should it replace money lost to budget cuts, keeping the sheriff's forces largely intact?

Conflicting approaches have produced a rift between the commission and the sheriff. The situation has echoes of 2007's sometimes-bitter budget fight when commissioners, who control the county's purse strings, asked White for cuts and he asked for new funding. The sheriff got \$11 million in new funding.

With property values falling and taxes going with them, county officials have asked White and the rest of the county's elected officials to plan for budget cuts of 10 percent or more next year.

Commissioners asked White to seek stimulus money to rehire deputies that are likely to be laid off. This week, they learned White asked for new deputies. That did not sit well with some commissioners.

"Our staff and the sheriff were supposed to get together and work that out," Commissioner Michael Cox said earlier this week. "But that didn't happen, and that makes me angry."

White said this week that he asked for new deputies because commissioners left him with no other option. Commissioners said White ignored their concerns by seeking the funds without more discussion.

"We're trying to keep people employed," County Administrator John Gallagher said Friday.

White raised the issue of seeking federal funds two weeks ago. At the time, he said he planned to ask for enough money to hire 60 new deputies - enough to make up for deputies he didn't have the money to hire for the last three years and won't have the money to hire for the next three years.

With law enforcement agencies competing for roughly 5,500 new officers, White conceded his action was a "Hail Mary" play that could produce just a handful of new

recruits, but also might produce nothing.

Commissioners balked at White's plan, because they would have to pay for those new deputies for a year after the grant runs out, adding millions of dollars to their budget. Commissioners asked White to explore the possibility of using the money to rehire deputies who might be laid off as part of belt-tightening later this year.

At the time, White said he was uncertain he legally could use the federal money to replace funds lost to budget cuts. In conversations with the Department of Justice last week, Gallagher and Commission Chairman Jack Mariano learned that White could do exactly that.

But by the time Gallagher reported that news to the rest of the commission this week, White had followed his plan and asked for 60 new deputies. Commissioners, who delegated White to seek the money on their behalf, felt betrayed.

"We gave some pretty specific directions to the sheriff, and he did just the opposite," Cox said. "It's our responsibility to apply for that grant."

"Or not," said Commissioner Ted Schrader.

White said Thursday he was forced to seek new deputies because commissioners didn't say for certain how much they expected him to cut from his budget by the April 14 filing deadline for the grant.

Without those cuts in black and white, White said he took the only route left to him.

"There's no decision in the board minutes to cut my budget," White said. "A discussion on the phone between a specialist in Washington and an obscure county in Florida isn't going to hold up."

White did not attend Tuesday's county commission meeting in New Port Richey to talk about his differences with the commission. Commissioners would like White to revise his grant request to ask for rehires instead of new hires, but it's unclear if he'll do that.

"I can't go out and ask for something I didn't lose," White said.

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