

## Conditions at county jail focus of all 4 sheriff candidates

By Dick Cook Staff Writer

All four candidates running for Hamilton County sheriff said their focus if elected would be on the county jail.

Sheriff John Cupp is seeking his third term in the \$92,500 per year post. He is running unopposed in the May 7 Republican Primary.

Joe Guidi, Larry Sneed and Richard Thurman are running as Democrats.

"Corrections is the overwhelming concern of whoever comes in," Sheriff Cupp said. "I've asked (county commissioners) for a couple more positions in the jail."

The Hamilton County Jail, built in the 1970s, is designed to hold 491 prisoners. It currently houses between 570 and 600 and is considered overcrowded.

Mr. Guidi, a former civil process server for the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department, said his campaign would focus on conditions in the jail.

"I think it's poorly managed," Mr. Guidi said. "It's taking between 17 and 24 hours to be booked and make bond. It used to be an hour, an hour and a half and you were gone."

Mr. Guidi said the delay in making bond is pushing up the census in the jail.

"Subtract the 120 people who are in holding cells and the jail is not that dangerously overcrowded," he said.

The Tennessee Constitution dictates the duties of sheriff as keeping the jail, serving legal processes and providing officers for the courts. With a budget of \$19.5 million, the sheriff is responsible for overseeing the duties of about 150 corrections officers in the jail and 140 sworn peace officers.

Larry Sneed, a former major crimes detective with the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department, said he also is concerned about the time it takes for booking a prisoner at the jail.

"The jail is very important," Mr. Sneed said. "When it takes 72 hours for someone put in for nonpayment of a traffic fine, that's a problem."

Mr. Sneed said the jail is understaffed, and he would increase pay of corrections officers to reduce turnover.

Mr. Thurman retired from the Hamilton County Sheriff's Department last year as a deputy chief.

He said the turnover rate of corrections officers in the jail is about 80 percent due to harsh working conditions and a lack of supervision.

He said he would correct the problem by "making sure it's staffed properly."

"I know money is the issue," he said. "We can free up money right now by getting drug courts in place and getting people charged with misdemeanors into counseling rather than locking them up."

Sheriff Cupp said turnover at the jail has dropped since the starting salary was raised 43 percent from \$16,500 to its current rate of \$24,000 per year.

He also said if the jail's computers are not down, the average time it takes for a prisoner to be booked and released is under 12 hours.

"They did a three week average and the time from arrest to release is 10 hours," he said. "The time from arrest to when we're finished with them, if they can make bond and what not, is five hours and 43 minutes."

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John Cupp

Age: 71

Education: Attended Florida Christian College in Tampa, Fla.

Occupation: Hamilton County sheriff

Joe Guidi

Age: 48

Education: Chattanooga High School (1971); attended Edmonson Business College

Occupation: Small business owner

Larry Sneed

Age: 51

Education: Soddy-Daisy High School; attended Chattanooga State Technical Community College

Occupation: Owner of private investigations firm

Richard Thurman

Age: 65

Education: B.S., University of Tennessee Chattanooga in Criminal Justice

Occupation: Retired Hamilton County Sheriff's Department