

SHERIFF CALLS SITUATION "DANGEROUS"

By LANCE COLEMAN Free Press Staff Writer

Sheriff John Cupp said there is a shortage of 40 employees at the Hamilton County Jail -- a situation that jeopardizes not only the safety of jailers, but the operation of the facility as well. He said he fears the shortage could prompt employee lawsuits that could cost the county more in the long run than it would to hire the additional workers. Currently there are 95 people working inside the jail, even though there are 110 employees on the payroll. Those not working in the jail have been assigned other duties, including clerks and guards in the city-county courts building. The sheriff added that the manpower shortfalls have put the County Jail below state standards. "The Tennessee Correction Institute says the minimum number needed to safely operate a jail is 141 and they go by standards posted by the federal government," he said. While the number of prisoners has jumped from around 250 to about 450 in the past two years, there has been no increase in personnel in that time, he said. "I don't have the manpower to do the job. They are stretched thin and that makes it dangerous," Sheriff Cupp said. Yet, last January, the County Commission denied a Sheriff's Department request for 40 additional jail personnel. That same month a jailer was assaulted while escorting inmates from the booking area. "The corrections officer has not been back to work, is still suffering headaches and resigned yesterday," Sheriff Cupp said. He says his main concern is safely operating the jail with the number of personnel he has. He's preparing another proposal for the county commission to get the extra people. "I'm trying to reconfigure the number so that if I say there are 140 in the jail there are 140 in the jail. I'll be able to tell commissioners where they are and which floor they're working on," he said. The sheriff said he plans to hire five new jailers today. Sheriff Cupp cautioned that if the commissioners deny his request and an emergency situation arises at the jail, he is constitutionally obligated to maintain the jail. The sheriff said he would reassign deputies from the patrol units if necessary.