

'Out of control' growth

Marion County sheriff warns officials that his agency is struggling to keep pace with rising demands for service.

By Jennifer Hunt
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Pointing to a massive influx of calls for service and escalating jail medical expenses, Marion County Sheriff Billy Woods used the April 7 county budget workshop to sound the alarm on how local population growth is impacting his agency.

Addressing the Board of County Commissioners, Woods explained that his office responded to 264,000 calls last year, a massive jump from 225,000 in 2016. Noting that the county's population now sits around 450,000, Woods requested help tracking the true burden on local infrastructure.

"The demand on my office is just it's out of control with this growth, frankly," he told the commission. "Is there a way that we can put people in a think tank to figure out how many... individuals we got coming into this county that are actually not residents?"

Woods expressed concern over upcoming road closures, like the impending closure of the 66th Street bridge over Interstate 75, which will force deputies to navigate heavily congested corridors like State Road 484 to traverse the county.

To address the strain, Woods referenced a staffing study conducted last year, reminding commissioners of the stark deficit in personnel.

"You've seen the study in which I gave you, they did a prediction in there," he



Marion County Sheriff Billy Woods speaks during a County Commission workshop at the McPherson Governmental Complex in Ocala on March 21, 2022. [Bruce Ackerman/Ocala Gazette file photo]

said. "The road (deputies) currently, we sit 120 short, and it predicted needed something over 300... because of this population group." To slowly bridge that gap, Woods plans to request 30 to 35 new road deputies each year over the next four years, along with five to 10 new detention deputies to manage the jail.

The jail, however, presents the sheriff's largest financial unknown, heavily driven by inmate medical care. Out of a \$24 million jail operating budget, just under \$15 million (62%) is consumed by medical expenses.

Woods revealed that his office is sending out requests for bids because the agency's contract with the Heart of Florida Health Center (the current medical provider for inmates) is expiring in September. He warned the board to prepare for a steep price hike.

"We are at the point of the contract for Heart of Florida is up, and we are...looking for other vendors," he said. "These other vendors are going to be more, considerably more. And we're not talking like \$100,000 or \$200,000 we're talking probably \$2 million to \$4 million, which is unknown for me right now."

As previously reported by the "Gazette," the Heart of Florida contract includes all medical care for inmates, including emergency room visits. Due to the high number of deaths at the jail, some of which have been attributed by the state's disability watchdog, Disability Rights Florida, and a jail nurse whistleblower to poor medical care at the jail, concerns have been raised that lax medical care could be tied to an effort by the provider to cut costs.

One notable example cited is the number of inmates being taken to local hospital emergency rooms for care having been cut nearly in half from what it has historically been.

Woods was quick to clarify that he was not disparaging Heart of Florida.

"Does that give a suggestion that Heart of Florida is done or is doing anything wrong?" he

said. "There are always areas in which we can improve, but Heart of Florida has always done their best."

Instead, Woods highlighted the challenges of providing health care in a detention setting. In just one month, inmates required nearly 1,200 prescriptions, 71 physician visits and 1,500 nursing visits, he said.

A one-month flat rate billing of Heart of Florida inmate care costs on average \$1.2 million, with no specific medical bill coding tied to each per inmate.

Woods detailed how some inmates actively subvert their medical care by "mouthing" medication — hiding pills in their cheeks to spit out later and sell within the jail to get high.

"I give you a picture, because people don't truly understand what goes on in a jail," he said, emphasizing why the high cost of rigorous medical staffing and oversight is unavoidable.

The sheriff described the staffing situation at the jail as a "revolving door," noting that at the end of February, his office had 12 vacancies for detention deputies and seven

for detention assistants. In that same month, nine employees left, seven of whom were detention deputies or assistants working in the jail.

Regarding costs and compensation, Woods confirmed that the starting wage for a detention deputy is \$62,400. To combat the high turnover rate, he stated that he is planning for 3% salary increases to keep pace with the market and keep their "heads above water."

He warned the commission that dropping below a 3% increase would actively create more vacancies by driving employees to leave for higher-paying jobs.

To manage the heavy workload — which includes an average of 1,000 individuals coming into the jail each month and detention deputies performing 14,000 cell shakedowns in February alone — Woods indicated he will be requesting five to 10 new detention deputy positions in the upcoming budget to keep up with the county's growth.

According to the clerk's office, the constitution officer's initial proposed budgets are due June 1.

County budget

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Rescue employees. "Every way we looked at it, just to do the minimum that is required of us to do, we will not be able to balance the budget."

HEALTH CARE COSTS

The county says it is currently facing an estimated 20% increase in health insurance costs, which, Bouyounes noted, will help prevent the depletion of health reserves while covering spikes in high-cost prescription claims and expensive emergency room visits.

To combat these rising costs, the county recently opened a dedicated Employee Health Clinic. The clinic costs approximately \$3.1 million annually to operate out of the Health Insurance Fund. The goal of the clinic is to provide free preventative care to county employees, retirees, and dependents, handle workers' compensation in-house and ultimately reduce the frequency of high-dollar medical claims.

Because the clinic was opened earlier this year, officials noted it will likely take until its second year of operation before the county begins to see tangible financial relief on its broader health insurance claims. In the meantime, the Tax Collector and other officials have pledged to launch aggressive internal campaigns to educate employees on how to make wiser, more cost-effective healthcare choices

FIRE/EMS

During the workshop, the county estimated there will be an annual \$4 million budget increase under the new collective bargaining agreement with MCFR fire/EMS personnel.

However, at the eighth negotiation meeting held last month, the county expressed concerns about being able to deliver what they had already discussed.

During that negotiation, Assistant County Administrator Amanda Tart explained that funding both a schedule change (a Kelly day or a 42-hour work schedule down from 56 hours) and significant pay increases is not financially feasible for the upcoming year as each initiative would cost approximately \$4 million. The county's general fund is already facing an \$8 million deficit.

Regarding the community and taxes, Tart expressed doubt that MCFR could afford to be a statewide leader in both pay and schedule within a "very conservative community that doesn't want a high tax base."

GROWING TAX BASE DOESN'T MAKE UP GROWING COSTS

Further straining the general fund, several constitutional officers announced they are seeking 3% Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) raises for their staff. Sheriff Billy Woods, Clerk of Court Greg Harrell and Tax Collector George Albright all confirmed they are planning for 3%

salary increases to keep pace with inflation and prevent employees from leaving for the private sector.

Budget Director Audrey Fowler presented several financial models to illustrate the dilemma. While Property Appraiser James "Jimmy" H. Cowan Jr. expects a 6.8% increase in taxable property values, it won't be enough to offset the new expenses.

Fowler revealed that funding all the requested budget increases — including health insurance, the MCFR fire/EMS union contract, and new personnel — would require raising the millage rate from 3.09 to 3.78. Keeping the millage at 3.09 with those requests would leave the county roughly \$27 million in the red.

Commissioners spent the latter half of the workshop grappling with how to bridge the gap without excessively burdening taxpayers. Commissioner Craig Curry suggested delaying some capital improvement projects to prioritize essential emergency services, asking, "What would it do to everybody if we put those off?"

Bouyounes agreed that \$6.6 million in new capital projects — such as the Judicial Center's third-floor buildout — could be temporarily deferred or funded using one-time carry-forward money.

The board also discussed potentially lowering the county's strict 20% cash reserve policy — a safety net used to float the county until tax revenues arrive in December — down to 15% or 18% to free up millions in cash.

R-Miami, convened a select committee on redistricting last year but after two meetings in December the panel stopped meeting and hasn't worked on any maps.

Neither has the Senate moved forward with any new districts.

A spokeswoman for DeSantis didn't return an email Tuesday asking whether his office was drafting new maps.

"Ultimately they're going to have to consider maps," DeSantis said Tuesday. "That will be done one way or another."

Redistricting schedule

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"We know how that Supreme Court case is going to come out at this point, I don't think there's much of a dispute about that," DeSantis said last week. "And I think Justice Alito is writing the opinion. So, us looking at our map, understanding the issues in that case and fixing it, I think that's appropriate whether the

decision comes before we do it or after."

Any new map passed would likely be subject to lawsuits, but whether it would be blocked by the courts before the November elections is unclear.

One major question hanging over the session: who will produce the new district map? House Speaker Daniel Perez,

Public Notice

NOTICE OF PUBLIC HEARING BY THE CITY COUNCIL FOR THE CITY OF OCALA, FLORIDA TO CONSIDER A PETITION TO ESTABLISH THE MOCKINGBIRD RIDGE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DISTRICT

DATE / TIME: FIRST READING

May 5, 2026 at 4:00 PM

SECOND READING & PUBLIC HEARING

May 19, 2026 at 4:00 PM

LOCATION: Ocala City Hall

110 SE Watula Avenue
Second Floor – Council Chambers
Ocala, Florida 34471

In compliance with the provisions of Chapter 190, Florida Statutes, a public hearing will be held by the City Council of the City of Ocala, Florida, to consider an ordinance to grant a petition to establish the Mockingbird Ridge Community Development District ("District"). The proposed District is comprised of approximately 169.31 acres, generally located west of Interstate 75, southeast of Southwest College Road, north of SW 66th Street and south of SW 40th Street. The petitioner has proposed to establish the District to plan, finance, acquire, construct, operate and maintain infrastructure and community facilities which may be authorized by such District under Florida law, including but not limited to, earthwork, roadways, stormwater management, utilities (water & wastewater), hardscape/landscape/irrigation and other infrastructure.

Copies of the petition and the proposed ordinance are open to public inspection at the City Clerk's Office, 110 SE Watula Ave., Ocala, Florida 34471, during regular business hours. For more information, call (352)629-2489.

All interested persons and affected units of general-purpose government shall be given an opportunity to appear at the hearing and present oral or written comments on the petition. Any persons or affected unit of general-purpose local government, who wish to appeal any decision made by the Board with respect to any matter considered at this public hearing will need a record of the proceedings. For that purpose the person or unit of general-purpose local government may need to insure that a verbatim record of the proceedings is made that includes the testimony and evidence upon which the appeal is to be based.

If you are a person with a disability who needs any accommodation in order to participate in this proceeding, you are entitled, at no cost to you, to the provision of certain assistance. Within five working days of receipt of this notice, please contact the City Clerk's Office, 110 SE Watula Ave., Ocala, Florida 34471, during regular business hours, or call (352)629-2489.

