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Critics: Navarro Created Crisis Sheriff's Office Helped Encourage Public Outrage During Jail Tent Flap

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A host of critics think Broward County Sheriff Nick Navarro manufactured the recent jail crowding crisis, which put 73 inmates in a tent and almost landed the sheriff behind bars.

They also think one reason Navarro was not held in contempt of court by U.S. District Judge William Hoeveler last week is that members of the Sheriff's Office encouraged and assisted a public campaign to defend their boss.

"This whole situation has been full of contradictions," said Chris Cloney, an attorney for the inmates. "And (the Sheriff's Office) explanation was a fabrication."

After an investigation, the U.S. Attorney's Office said Navarro created the crisis by conducting drug sweeps on Jan. 27, knowing they would aggravate jail crowding.

The sheriff conducted "a reverse sting, anticipating that this operation and other operations would result" in overcrowding, Assistant U.S. Attorney Mark Schnapp said. "Those actions would necessarily cause the tent to be used to house prisoners."

Navarro said on Friday that was "absolutely not" his intent.

Cloney said he thinks the episode was orchestrated because the Sheriff's Office had stockpiled cots for use in a tent set up earlier at the North Broward Detention Center in Pompano Beach.

"I saw (the cots) myself in the main jail, and I was informed there were some being stored in Pompano," he said.

Even the drama that ensued was partly scripted by the Sheriff's Office, which helped coordinate petition drives, letter-writing campaigns and newspaper ads.

On Jan. 31, the day after Navarro was threatened with contempt of court, a sheriff's official spoke before a civic group -- which sent an immediate protest to the judge.

Political supporters also delivered petitions to the Sheriff's Office, which passed them on to a citizens' committee. The committee then asked many of the signers to contribute toward a full-page newspaper ad in Navarro's defense.

It was the second major crisis in the jails since July 12, when the Sheriff's Office ran a huge drug crackdown and housed inmates in a tent without required permission from the city or the state Department of Corrections.

The resulting uproar ended with a trip to federal court, where Navarro got what he had hoped for when Hoeveler forced the county to hasten construction of more jail cells.

Critics said the episode did not hurt the sheriff's re-election campaign.

"The timing, the media coverage, was all obvious," Cloney said. "It was an election year. You can't buy that kind of media coverage."

County officials said they would prefer that the agencies involved in the jail problem cooperate instead of compete.

"It helps for everybody to buy into the notion that it's a system whose parts have to work together," said Pete Corwin, coordinator of the county's jail-building efforts.

On Jan. 13, the sheriff again erected a tent at the Pompano Beach jail complex, saying it would be needed to process people arrested during Super Bowl week. But inmates were moved there on Jan. 27, when a drug sweep began.

Hoeveler called an emergency hearing on Jan. 30 and ordered the inmates back into the jail buildings.

His office was immediately inundated with angry calls about the situation, an aide said. She said the calls took up so much time that Hoeveler's staff had to come in on a Saturday to get work done.

In court, Hoeveler twice interrupted his remarks to mention the response he had received.

"I noticed that the court made mention of the type of phone calls it was getting," Cloney said. "I'm loath to think that had an influence on his decision, but I don't know."

The next day, a Sheriff's Office special projects officer, Marty Rahinsky, appeared before directors of the Broward County Crime Commission to explain the situation. The private, non-profit organization immediately sent a letter to the judge supporting Navarro and the use of tents.

Navarro is an honorary director of the crime commission, although he was not at the meeting, said Frank Pinter, the group's chairman and a former Sheriff's Office detective.

Other current and former sheriff's officers also serve on the board.

"Certainly there was no official sanction from this office" for his deputies to get involved in public campaigns on his behalf, Navarro said. But he said it was their right as citizens to do so if they chose.

In west Broward, political supporters of the sheriff circulated petitions.

Rose Rosenberg, who lives in the Sunrise Lakes condominiums and was a volunteer in Navarro's 1988 campaign, said someone -- she did not remember who -- came to her home and picked up the petitions after she called the Sheriff's Office.

Dave Yurchuck, the sheriff's director of community relations, said the petitions poured in without prompting.

Yurchuck gave them to James Brooks, a stockbroker who formed an informal group called Citizens for a Safer Broward. The group contacted many of the signers for contributions and took out a full-page ad in the Feb. 8 Fort Lauderdale News and Sun-Sentinel at a cost of \$7,884 to support Navarro.

Yurchuck said his office directed people to Brooks "if they wanted to know who the Citizens for a Safer Broward were or how to reach them."

"Apparently, they were getting a lot of calls, which they referred to us," Brooks said.