

# The Rockbridge ADVOCATE

"INDEPENDENT AS A HOG ON ICE"



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## Sheriff's candidate arrested while giving himself a plug

*Brian Rowsey was handcuffed by state police and hauled off to jail on a felony charge during an interview in the parking lot of his wife's pawn shop.*

Brian Rowsey is not your typical candidate for sheriff. What started him thinking about running, he says, is his criminal record. "I went to jail for 15 days for something I did not do." A few minutes after he made that comment, he was taken to jail by state police.

Rowsey, who owns a landscaping business, was in the midst of telling the editor of this publication how much he's done for the community when three state troopers, in separate cars, pulled into the parking lot of his wife Jodi's pawn shop on Rt. 60 just west of Lexington.

Rowsey spends a good bit of time at the shop, and was in his car in the lot answering some questions about his campaign. (He'd suggested doing the interview in the car because it's air conditioned and it was a hot, muggy afternoon.)

Before the troopers arrived, one of the things Rowsey was talking about was his being convinced that running for sheriff would make him a target.

As an example, he said, the day before he was driving out to the pawn shop and saw a state trooper parked by the red barn just east of the shop. The trooper pulled Rowsey over and gave him three tickets. One was for not wearing a seat belt. One was for a passenger not wearing a seat belt. And the third was for defective equipment, a burned

out brake light to be exact.

Exactly what happened during the traffic stop will probably come out in court.

But out at the pawn shop, one of the troopers told him he was under arrest. The charge is felony destruction of a public document. Commonwealth's Attorney Bucky Joyce says that his chief deputy, Chris Billias, reviewed the case with the trooper, and then with him. "He tore up some paperwork," Joyce says. It is not a crime to tear up your own copy of a traffic summons. He declined to say just what Rowsey is accused of tearing up, or to say anything else about the charge.

Rowsey said the trooper screwed up and gave him the wrong paper, and thinking it was his, he tore it up.

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As Rowsey was being handcuffed, he told the folks who were watching, "They'll probably tase me." One of the troopers replied that he didn't carry a taser. "I'm the next sheriff," Rowsey said before he was pushed into the police car. "Get a rapist. Get a child molester! ... You are some jokes, man!" His remarks seemed to roll off the troopers with no great effect.

Rowsey's aunt, Maddy Ruley, witnessed the arrest. (She wasn't the only one.) And she worried about what would happen to her nephew — worried to the point where she mentioned Treyvon Martin.

Out at the jail, Rowsey didn't appear to be any worse for wear and tear, though the next day he was rubbing his wrists.

Rowsey's father, James, arrived at the jail about the same time his son was being driven through the sally port. "It's terrible," he said, waiting in the lobby for a magistrate to release Brian. "I told him they're going to set him up. ... It's just common sense." But, he said, "he's stubborn and hard headed."

Earlier in the month, Rowsey qualified to get his name on the ballot to run against county sheriff Chris Blalock.

The arrest on a felony charge puts a peculiar twist on his campaign. There's nothing prohibiting someone accused of a felony from running for office. But the Virginia Constitution prohibits convicted felons from voting, and says that public office-holders must be eligible voters.

In the minutes before Rowsey's arrest, he was laying out his plans for the county sheriff's office once he's elected and going on a bit of a tear about corruption.

There appears to be little doubt in his mind that he will be the next sheriff, and he says that he's received tremendous support so far.

First of all, he says, "I'll hire a black man." The sheriff's department, he says, hasn't done so in years and years. (Paul Smothers is the only such deputy here now.)

And Rowsey says he has a video recording of a deputy making some racist remarks in the pawn shop. He played an audio recording that was difficult to understand or verify. (He later said he's destroyed the tapes because he didn't want to get anyone in trouble.) "When they have a meeting out there, it looks like a Ku Klux Klan meeting," Rowsey says. (The sheriff says he doesn't tolerate racism from his deputies.)

Second, he says, "No snitches."

And the list goes on from there.

He wants "99%" of the traffic tickets here to be given to travelers on the interstate, not local folks on county roads.

He doesn't want the state police here.

He wants to abolish work release and get the TVs out of the jail. (The sheriff doesn't control the jail, but does sit on the board that oversees it.)

He wants to cut the sheriff's budget by \$1 million — about a third — and use the saved money to do something for the kids, like build a basketball court "or something."

He wants to put an end to the practice of the department's sending cell phone messages to notify folks that someone's been arrested, and says the practice is just a way of abusing the poor. They never post it when they arrest the upper crust, he claims. Then again, he says, "They never pull over the lawyers and doctors."

He wants deputies to run their cars "until the transmission falls out."

And he wants to be highly visible, something he accuses Sheriff Chris Blalock of being only at election time and when there's a carnival.

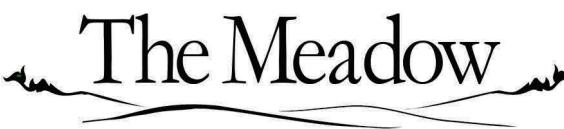
The day after the arrest that brought the interview to an abrupt halt, Rowsey wrote up the following statement of his intentions.

When I get [to be] sheriff these are some of the things I will do to change things.

1. I will interview each officer to see what they like and don't like and I will make the change to where they like everything.

2. I will give warnings for tail lights, brake lights, signals not working — all little stuff. I will be fair to everyone and not give one person a ticket and let the other go.

3. I will not have snitches working for the sheriff's department. That is what investigators of the drug task force's job is.



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4. We will patrol your house and land if you go on vacation if you give a call to let the sheriff's department know, so no one will break in.
  5. If they find your stolen items they will be returned to you. Guaranteed.
  6. If you do the crime, you will do the time. I will not make deals.
  7. I will put deputies in every county school to control bullying and to protect the kids.
  8. I will save 1,000,000 dollars a year compared to what they are spending now.
  9. I will not be buying new cars. The cars will be there for my four-year term.
  10. I will have two cops in a car and there will be a car in each part of the county. We will get to you before any emergency vehicle. We will be there in two or three minutes.
  11. [We will] keep all commercial businesses from dumping in dumpsters and keep them a lot cleaner.
- 

Rowsey can get particularly worked up about folks who have arrested him over the years, but not nearly as worked up as he is about snitches.

"Everybody's setting everybody up for drugs. ... Instead of getting people to get help, they arrest 'em and wire 'em up." And the crimes snitches commit while they're snitching get ignored or forgiven. "The sheriff's department, all they thrive on is drugs," while "the people making trouble, constantly walk the streets."

"These kids get wired up, setting up other kids, so the kids [they help bust] can never get a job."

"They never bust the big guy. I'll get the big guy."

And as far as Rowsey is concerned, there are too many cops here even without the snitches. He says he'd get deputies out of the office and out on the streets, and cut the number working security at the courthouse. "Our kids need to be safe. We don't need four or five cops at the courthouse. ... "You don't need this many cops. This is a good community."

Rowsey says he's had some experience with snitches himself at his wife's pawn shop. He says a kid brought some gold in once. Included in the batch was a stolen ring. Rowsey says he called the sheriff's department, told them who brought in the goods, and was told, "This guy's working a case for us. It goes on every day."

And, he says, after he qualified to get his name on the ballot, a snitch came in and tried to sell him some stolen goods. The ploy, he says, was an obvious set-up.

Sheriff Chris Blalock says that as far as he knows, there have been no snitches sent into the pawn shop. And, he says, "We're not going to protect a snitch over larceny charges. ... ; and any day we can recover stolen property, it's more important than drugs."

During the interview, Rowsey made a lot of claims. "Bucky [Joyce, the Commonwealth's Attorney] said three-quarters of the sheriff's [deputies] are dirty. I got it on my phone." Rowsey had a phone with him when he made the claim, and so he was asked to play the recording. Rowsey fiddled with the phone a bit, then said the recording was >

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on another phone. By press time, he hadn't produced the recording, and Joyce denies ever saying any such thing, and sounded amazed that anyone would say he had.

Rowsey claims there is at least one law enforcement officers here who is a convicted felon. But a check of court records of the one name he gave turned up nothing. There is one officer in Buena Vista who got into some trouble when he was a teenager over stealing a bicycle. Rowsey says he was with the officer at the time of the theft. Juvenile records are routinely sealed.

In fact, Rowsey's own record would currently disqualify him from being hired by the sheriff's department, which doesn't hire persons convicted of crimes of moral turpitude: lying, cheating or stealing.

Before his arrest during the interview, Rowsey's record included being indicted on three felony charges — the ones he wants to be cleared of — that resulted in his spending 15 days in jail after they were reduced to misdemeanors. They all date back to 2007. He was accused of stealing a generator from VMI, obtaining money by false pretenses from the sheriff's department, and receiving stolen goods, namely three weed-eaters and two chain saws.

Once the charges were reduced to misdemeanors, he pled guilty, but says he really didn't do it.

The generator, he says, was stolen by "one of the boys [who used to work for him]," who pointed the finger at Rowsey in an attempt to save his own butt.

The obtaining money by false pretense and weed eater charges, he says, stemmed from his buying the stuff,

learning later it was stolen, and trying to obtain the reward being offered without snitching on anybody.

The long and short of it all, Rowsey says, is that he bought some stuff from folks who were hard up — and he's always looking for bargains — and when he learned it was stolen, did what he says he's always done, tried to get it returned to the rightful owner. And, he insists, he's been better at getting stuff back to where it belongs than the sheriff's department has been.

For the three misdemeanors, Rowsey was sentenced to a total of 36 months in jail, with 35 months suspended, and he was ordered to either return the generator, undamaged, to VMI or to pay for it.

There are two other cases against him in the circuit court files. Both of them are misdemeanor appeals.

One stems from October 2010, when he was convicted in lower court of unlawfully feeding deer, unlawfully feeding bear, and killing a deer with a gun during archery season. The total fines and costs amounted to \$1,962, and he was given a 30-day suspended jail sentence. Rowsey dropped the appeal after filing it. But in lower court, he claimed he was set up by Tony McFaddin, who had been a deputy sheriff, was a game warden at the time he arrested Rowsey, and is back at the sheriff's department.

There's no love lost between McFaddin and Rowsey. McFaddin doesn't say much about him these days. But Rowsey has lots to say, practically none of it printable, about McFaddin.

The other case Rowsey appealed to circuit court was



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an improper driving conviction stemming from 2009. The case apparently stemmed from an incident on Route 11 that also led to a charge, which was dismissed, of brandishing a firearm. The warrant was sworn out by Jacob Chenault. "Brian Rowsey followed my car very closely on Rt. 11. When he turned off the by-pass he was beside me and pointed a gun at me and my girlfriend." The improper driving case was taken under advisement for a year and then dismissed. But in the process, Rowsey was fined \$100 for contempt of court for failing to appear.

Chenault, Rowsey says, is one of the folks who blabbed to cover his own misdeeds in the theft and stolen goods cases. And, Rowsey says, Chenault and his accomplice have both recanted. He has a recording of Chenault apologizing and saying he was all messed up at the time. But in the recording, despite considerable prodding from Rowsey, Chenault doesn't fault the sheriff's department. Asked flat out if the department got him to lie, Chenault says, "No."

Rowsey has been in court several times over the last decade. The list includes the following:

Allowing a dog to run at large (12/29/08): Dismissed.

Insufficient tread on tires (7/13/11): Found guilty in abstentia, fined \$50.

Operating an uninspected vehicle (4/21/11): Found guilty in abstentia, fined \$30.

Insufficient tire treads (8/3/11): Found guilty in abstentia, fined \$50.

Aggressive driving (3/26/12): Guilty, fined \$250.

Safety belt violation (6/2/14): Waived trial, prepaid \$25.

And there have been debt warrants filed against Rowsey and his Greenway Lawn & Landscape business. Those include warrants filed by Donald's Auto and Truck Repair (2012); The News-Gazette (2008); Carilion Stonewall Jackson Hospital (2009); the Rockbridge Farmers Coop (2014); and BARC (2008).

Rowsey says he wouldn't hesitate to hire someone with a record like his as a deputy. "The ones with criminal records are some of the best guys I know." But, he says, he wouldn't hire a convicted felon.

"I ain't been in trouble in 10 years," he says. "My house is paid for. My vehicle's paid for. I own the building where my wife's shop is. ... People change."

Just before his most recent arrest, Rowsey talked about all the good he has done in the community. He's coached for RARO and is now coaching basketball for the A.A.U. He says he's made donations to "every single cakewalk." He's donated trophies and prizes to Cub Scouts. He says he's given money and made loans to folks who were down on their luck.

"Everybody talks to me," he says. And it's hard for him to believe that "out of 23,000 people, ain't nobody running [against the sheriff] but me."

"I make over \$300,000 a year" — papers filed with his last arrest warrant put the figure at \$28,000 — "and I'm willing to give it all up to help the community."

"People love me," he says.



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