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Hillsborough County employees to move out during RNC

By Mike Salinero



Tens of thousands of delegates, journalists and protestors will crowd into the concrete canyons of downtown Tampa during the Republican National Convention.

Hillsborough County government officials think that's a recipe for trouble and have decided their employees won't be part of the mix.

Starting one week before the Aug. 26 convention, more than a thousand county government workers will vacate the 28-story Frederick B. Karl County Center. They will return the Tuesday after Labor Day, Sept. 3.

But the move won't be a holiday for county workers, said Deputy County Administrator Sharon Subadan.

"All county services will be offered at alternative locations," Subadan said. "Our goal here is to minimize any traffic concerns and any possible interactions with protesters."

A spokesman for Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn said no decision has been made as to whether city offices will close.

Subadan said the decision to move out of the building was made at the recommendation of the sheriff's office. County officials have been in planning meetings with law enforcement, both local and federal, for months looking for solutions to potential problems before they pop up during the convention.

Police are planning for the possibility that political protests could turn violent as they did at the 2008 Republican National Convention in St. Paul, Minn. A fenced-off security zone will extend some distance around the convention site at the Tampa Bay Times Forum, but law enforcement agencies won't announce the specific location of the zone until a month or two before the convention.

"How in the hell can you service people and have a fence around the building?" said county Tax Collector Doug Belden, explaining why he decided weeks ago to move his 30 employees out of downtown to satellite offices.

"Why take an unnecessary risk that closes the venue when we can provide that service at seven different locations for two weeks?" Belden said.

Other county government offices downtown that will close those two weeks include the property appraiser, civil service and supervisor of elections. The clerk of circuit court's office, which employs 784 people, will vacate several buildings downtown.

"The clerk's office is impacted by the event not only at the County Center but at all our core offices downtown, which includes the old courthouse, the new courthouse, our (information technology) office and our mail center," said Dan Klein, chief deputy clerk of court. "We will have to deploy resources to other facilities based on the needs of the clerk's office and the customers we serve."

Other elected constitutional officers located in the county center also plan to keep operating at other locations. The 12 people who work in the supervisor of elections office downtown will relocate to the Robert L. Gilder Elections Service Center on Falkenburg Road.

"In terms of voter services, we don't really think there's going to be any disruption at all," said Lennard's spokesman, Travis Abercrombie. "We're planning on continuity."

Property Appraiser Rob Turner has about 75 employees in his downtown office, but many of them work from the field via computer. Turner has four other offices around the county and residents can take care of business through the appraiser's Website.

Though the move will cause some confusion, Turner said, it will serve as a valuable training exercise to prepare for hurricanes or other natural or man-made disasters.

"I'd rather do it this way than have 110 mph winds involved," Turner said.

A total of 1,047 government employees work at the county center: 691 work for County Administrator Mike Merrill, and 356 work for elected constitutional officers, the county commission, the Planning Commission and Civil Service.

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