

Frequently Asked Questions--Jail Renovation and Expansion

On November 6, 2018 Houghton County voters will decide whether to renovate and expand the 55-year-old county jail. Know the facts before you make your decision.

1. Why do we need an addition to the existing jail?

The 55-year-old jail has long outlived its usefulness. It does not comply with mandatory minimum jail standards. The jail and work camp at the airport have been cited by the state's Department of Corrections for safety violations and the work camp is not allowed to house females. The jail and work release center do not comply with many of the Michigan DOC guidelines and inspections. Conditions of confinement expose the county to serious liability.

The current jail is so overcrowded that many defendants and offenders whom the courts have determined belong in jail are often released prematurely, or even worse, are not jailed at all. This is a public safety issue. County officials fear that someday the wrong person may be released, leading to needless violence against the innocent. Among the many different types of offenders who are often released early by the courts are detainees convicted of drunken driving, driving with a suspended license, and perpetrators of domestic violence.

2. Who should be in jail (and who should not)?

The sheriff does not control who is brought to jail or how long they stay. State law requires the county to house all lawfully-committed persons. The current jail population consists of inmates awaiting sentencing as well as offenders already sentenced for felonies and misdemeanors. Because of chronic overcrowding of the existing jail, offenders are often released before serving their full sentences. This impacts public safety and drastically reduces deterrence. At the same time, the Michigan Department of Corrections continues to divert sentenced felons from state prisons to local jails, putting more pressure on the Houghton County Jail.

Studies have shown Houghton County has the lowest incarceration rate (number of inmates per 1,000 residents) in the Upper Peninsula—even lower than Luce County, which has no jail, primarily due to lack of space. Baraga County's incarceration rate is 2.5 times higher; the average rate for all 15 counties is nearly twice Houghton County's rate.

In some cases, local judges' hands are tied because of chronic overcrowding, taking away one of their sentencing tools and pretrial detention options to protect public safety and provide deterrence.

3. What do citizens get for their \$11 million investment in the renovation and addition ?

The county will be able to confine up to 90 defendants and offenders, compared to approximately 43 now. The expanded jail will provide the courts with adequate secure space to safely confine detainees and offenders who need secure detention. The addition will also provide secure indoor access to the courts. The new addition will not diminish or replace current alternatives to incarceration, such as offender diversion programs and drug court.

4. Could the facility be expanded again in the future if needed?

If state policies continue to put more long-term inmates in local county jails, more space can be added if required. In 2006, state prisons held 51,454 offenders. By 2017, the state had cut its prison population to less than 40,000 inmates.

Rather than building even more beds now, county officials propose to “build only what we need” to keep property taxes at the lowest possible tax rate, while designing the addition to allow for further expansion in the future if needed.

5. Will the new jail help reduce the number of offenders who come back to jail again?

Yes. The proposed addition will be a deterrent for repeat offenders. It will also provide space to involve inmates in constructive activities and programs. Jail is a deterrent. Conversely, early release or not spending any time in jail because of crowding sends the wrong message to would-be criminals.

6. Will the new facility require more jail staff to operate it?

Because the county operates two separate facilities (the jail and a minimum-security Work Camp at the airport), jail staffing is currently stretched thin. With an expanded jail, the work camp will close and offenders would be housed in the expanded jail. Past studies have indicated that the existing jail and work camp staffing levels are too low. By combining the two facilities, the expanded jail would operate at current staffing levels.

7. Was Camp Kitwen considered as a location for a new jail?

State officials recently denied the county’s request to tour the interior of the prison due to its poor condition and “potential health and safety concerns” for visitors. Camp Kitwen was constructed 25 years ago as a low-security dorm-style prison. Renovations to convert it to a jail, as well as substantially higher operational and transportation costs for taxpayers, make Camp Kitwen a more costly alternative.

8. Do authorities have the power to close the existing jail?

Lawsuits by offenders in federal court could result in the jail being closed. The largest risks county taxpayers currently face are injuries to staff or inmates, or a lawsuit by a prisoner or former prisoner. County officials believe proactive and responsible local governance is the best solution.

9. How much will the proposed addition cost taxpayers?

The \$11 million project will require an increase in the property tax rate of approximately 0.75 mills (or 75 cents in tax for each \$1,000 of taxable value). The bond, or loan, is based on a 20-year term. A home worth \$100,000 would see, on average, an additional tax of \$37.50 annually. On a monthly basis the jail addition would cost a property owner \$3.12, or 10 cents a day more. Keep in mind these are averages. Most property owners in Houghton County, especially those who purchased their property 15 or 20 years ago, will pay significantly less than the average.

Know the facts and vote on November 6. For more information go to ***Houghtoncounty.net***