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LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE COPPER COUNTRY

Jail Committees Update

Faith Morrison, Advocate for Addressing HoCo Jail Issues

Houghton County Jail issues are back on the front burner after the failure, in August, of a \$32 million, 30-year bond millage vote. For a history of the jail discussion, please see the *Past Jail Projects* tab on the County's website <https://houghtoncounty.net>.

Three committees have been formed and all three have met. The three committees are addressing 1) How to modify the jail plan to address voters' concerns so that a millage can pass; 2) What to do with the building on the Sharon Avenue property and what to do with the old jail should a new one be authorized; and 3) What county-held properties could be sold to reduce the tax burden of financing a new jail. The discussions of the committees are being conducted in public meetings announced on the county's website, <https://houghtoncounty.net>. There is often a Zoom/Teams option for attending virtually.



(caption: The minutes for the current jail discussions are available on the county's website under individual tabs according to committee; look for the 2026 Jail Project link on the left side. Also in the same location are materials archived from the 2025 and 2018 jail discussions.)

The first committee is called the *Jail Committee*. Chaired by Jared Hyrkas from UP Engineers and Architects, this is the largest committee and has the biggest job. As articulated by Chair Hyrkas in the committee's minutes, their objective is "to get a new plan that the people can support." The first meeting included getting-to-know-you discussions and a gathering of what members and attendees had heard were the voters' objections to passing the August jail millage. The next meeting of this committee is Monday December 8 at 4pm in the 5th floor conference room in the Courthouse. The public is invited to attend; there will be a Zoom/Microsoft Teams option to attend and participate virtually.

The second committee (*The Sharon Avenue Property-Use Committee*) has focused on the former church building on the Sharon Avenue property. After two meetings, a tour of the building, and input from contractors and building experts, it appears that the deficiencies of the building are substantial. The difficulty is that the standards are high for a structure to be used by the county for anything jail related. At its second meeting, the committee voted to recommend that the building be demolished due to the high cost and futility of re-using the structure. The committee will report more details at the next Board of Commissioners meeting, which is Wednesday November 12 at 6pm in the Circuit Courtroom on the 3rd floor of the Courthouse. The public is invited to attend; there will be a Zoom/Microsoft Teams option to attend and participate (public comment) virtually.

The third committee (*County-Held Properties Committee*) has generated controversy due to a conflict over Canal View, the Houghton County medical care facility. Canal View, which is owned and operated by Houghton County, is a popular and cherished facility with an outstanding reputation in elder care and fiscal governance. In August 2025 Canal View's operating millage was strongly supported by the voters of Houghton County.

What does Canal View have to do with the jail? The answer to this is that, as a county-owned facility, Canal View represents an asset that the county holds. Some members of the community are advocating that sale of county-held assets be considered to raise funds for other county priorities, specifically the jail.

It is unclear how much support there is in the county or on the Board of Commissioners for selling county properties, especially Canal View. In the spring of 2025, this topic was raised in County Board discussions but not acted upon. After the failure of the August jail millage, and in the spirit of considering all options, the Board agreed to fully investigate the idea that sale of some county-held assets (mentioned were the Marina, Transfer Station, Airport, and yes, Canal View) could generate funds for the jail. This is not a commitment to selling any of the county's assets—rather it is an acknowledgement that knowing the value of county-held assets will allow for a more complete assessment of any decision to retain or sell that asset.

The *County-Held Properties Committee* recommended to the County Board (as reported in the October 14 2025 Board Minutes) to put out a request for proposals (RFP) for an appraisal of both Canal View and the Houghton County Marina; the Board voted in October to do this. There has been substantial push-back from some members of the public and from the Canal View Board, as the RFP was interpreted as a step towards selling Canal View. This topic is slated to be revisited by the County Board at their next meeting, Wednesday November 12 at 6pm in the 3rd floor courtroom and online. As stated above, this meeting, and all County Board meetings, are open to the public and have the option of virtual attendance and public comment periods. The recent move of County Board meetings from 3pm in the small 5th floor conference room to 6pm in the much larger 3rd floor Circuit Court courtroom is intended to encourage participation by the public.

All citizens of Houghton County are encouraged to engage in the important discussion of how we address the advancing age and poor condition of the current jail and the lack of appropriate space for housing both inmates and Sheriff's services. This discussion has been ongoing for at least 25 years. The project costs keep going up, and the challenges posed by the current facilities keep growing. The League of Women Voters of the Copper Country are in favor of addressing these issues; and sooner, rather than later. For more information, please see the pages discussed here and the YouTube videos made earlier this year by the League (see links below; links available on County website as well).

<p>Addressing Critical Needs for Public and Workplace Safety in Houghton County</p>  <p>Addressing Critical Needs for Public and Workplace Safety in Houghton County</p> <p>Houghton County March/April 2025</p> <p>0:00 / 1:01:30</p> <p>YouTube</p>	<p>Maintaining a Suitable and Sufficient Jail for Houghton County Michigan</p>  <p>Maintaining a Suitable and Sufficient Jail for Houghton County Michigan</p> <p>Faith Morrison, Hancock July/August 2025</p> <p>YouTube</p>
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Addressing Critical Needs: <https://youtu.be/zcjmsQlIKkg>

Maintaining a Suitable and Sufficient Jail: <https://youtu.be/ef1fwCeu5zQ>