

**PRESS RELEASE LWVCC, February 12, 2026**

**LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE COPPER COUNTRY**

**Addressing Issues with the Houghton County Jail**

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**Historical Timeline**

- 8-5-2025 Millage for \$32 million for a new jail/sheriff's office does not pass 44% yes, **54% no.**
- 11-2025 Three Houghton County Jail committees (and one subcommittee) have been active since November 2025 (agenda, minutes at *houghtoncounty.net*). Overall goal: ***Develop a jail/sheriff's office plan that the public can support.*** Focus is on what the public is saying about why they did not support the 2025 millage and addressing those issues.
- 4/14/26 Deadline for committees' reports to the Board

**Status report 2-12-2026**

There were two jail-related discussions held this week:

- 2/10/26 County Board Regular Meeting, 6pm
- 2/11/26 Jail Needs Subcommittee, 9:30am

At the Regular Board meeting, four commissioners were present (Chair Tom Tikkanen and Commissioners Gretchen Janssen, Joel Keranen, and Glenn Anderson), and they discussed the jail project under agenda items J-13, J-14, & J-15 (New Business). In addition, I made a public comment on the jail issue at the end of the meeting (details below). The account here also refers to discussions during the 2/2/26 Board Work Session at which three commissioners were present (Chair Tom Tikkanen, Vice Chair Roy Britz, and Commissioner Janssen).

*J.13 Topic: Final Jail Committees Report, April Deadline:* As expected after the discussion at the 2/2/26 Work Session, Board Chair Tom Tikkanen suggested setting a **reporting deadline for all three jail-related committees** (*Jail Committee, County-Held Properties Committee, and Sharon Avenue and Jail-Use Committee*) to consolidate the efforts of the three committees. After hearing positive feedback from Commissioner Anderson and no objections from the other two commissioners, Chair Tikkanen **set a deadline of April 14 for the three jail committees to report to the Board** (the April Regular meeting of the board).

J.14 Topic: Scheduling Jail & Sheriff's Office Millage: Chair Tom Tikkanen suggested that the Board **schedule a millage to support a new jail/sheriff's office building in November**. This issue was initially raised by Chair Tikkanen at the 2/2/26 Work Session. Chair Tikkanen noted that at the work session they had discussed July or November as possible millage dates, with discussion at that time leaning towards November. Commissioner Anderson asked about other millages that may be on the ballot in 2026. According to County Clerk Jennifer Kelly, the ISD (Intermediate School District) is going for a CTE (Career and Technical Education) renewal millage during the May 5<sup>th</sup> special election, and there will also be three school millages affecting some Houghton County residents, Dollar Bay, Ewen/Trout Creek, and Baraga. Clerk Kelly has not heard of any millages planed for November, but she noted that she did not know ahead of the filing deadline that the three May school millages were in the works, so there may be some planned for August and November.

Commissioner Anderson noted that there would be a lot of people voting in November, and he said he would support either August or November. Chair Tikkanen commented that the Board had received some criticism from voters for choosing the August election date in 2025. He agreed that November is the traditional election month. Tikkanen also described the jail issue as nonpartisan. Tikkanen said that we all suffer as a community having a substandard jail and our suffering will be even more when our current jail fails. Tikkanen said he believes the community expects the Board to move forward on this and that a delay past November would not be in the best service to the community. There were no other comments. Chair Tikkanen asked the Board to consider to formally adopt that a jail/sheriff's office millage be on the ballot in November. The motion was made by Commissioner Anderson, supported by Commissioner Janssen, and passed by a roll call vote by a vote of 3-1 with Commissioner Keranen dissenting.

The project schedule adopted above would follow the timeline described in our previous press release of 2/5/2026 **available at LWVCCMI.org under Houghton County Jail Initiative**. Note that the November election is November 3, 2026 (I had given the Board the wrong date during the meeting).

J.15 Sharon Ave RFP Language: The board considered an RFP (Request for Proposals) recommended by the Sharon Avenue and Jail Use Committee. The RFP reads as follows: *"Houghton County is requesting a Schematic Design and code review for new County offices to house non court related offices (such as the treasurer, clerk, building department, drain commissioner) in the existing Sharon Avenue building that was recently acquired. The design shall also include a preliminary structural design for reinforcing the existing roof to meet current loading requirements and addition of a firewall(s) to keep the building from needing to be sprinklered. Provide an engineer's cost estimate to make the floor plan changes, firewall, MEP upgrades, and structural changes to accommodate the new layout. No work on the exterior of the building will be included"* (text from the meeting packet, page 52). Moved by Commissioner Anderson, supported by Commissioner Janssen, the motion passed 4-0.

This action of the Board was made to address concerns from the public that the former church building on the Sharon Avenue property be re-used and not torn down. The RFP will indicate an “engineer’s cost estimate” of what preserving the building for re-use would cost.

*N. Public Comments by Jail Advocate Faith Morrison.* At the second public comment period I spoke to add to the public record the timeline that a jail project discussion would have to follow in order to get to a millage vote on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. I also spoke directly to Commissioner Keranen, who voted against the scheduling of a jail millage in November, asking him to please share his thoughts about the jail project and its scheduling. I said that this is the time for all voices to speak on the jail issue so that all opinions can be weighed by the Commissioners and the public as we move towards addressing the need for a more appropriate jail for Houghton County.

At the 2/11/26 Jail Needs Subcommittee meeting there was this discussion:

1. *County Board Update.* Faith Morrison reported on the jail-related discussions/actions of the Board on 2/10/26. Sheriff Saaranen, who was also at the Board meeting, expressed concern about the jail project’s future given that it does not have full Board support (Commissioner Keranen voted no on scheduling the millage in November). He said that Commissioner Keranen had legitimate concerns and that these must be addressed or the work of the committees will be in vain.
2. *April Reporting Deadline of the Jail Committee.* Jail Needs is a subcommittee of the Jail Committee, and the Jail Committee now has an April 14 reporting deadline. Sheriff Saaranen said we need to move faster on our work so that the needs of the jail are clearly expressed in the report of the Jail Committee on April 14.
3. *Dessellier’s scenarios:* An additional scenario is requested from Detective Charlie Klein related to the evidence-storage crisis and needs. There was also discussion of the production of the videos for social media based on the scenarios. Valorie Troesch said they need to be short. We still need help with this from knowledgeable social media experts.
4. *Q&A with the Public on the Jail Project.* Faith Morrison noted that when the county-wide CTE millage originally passed ten years ago, George Stockero from the ISD had gone everywhere in the County to talk to people about it. She suggested we should do this. The Sheriff agreed that his preference is for Q&A and not presentations. Morrison has approached the Chamber of Commerce.
5. *Getting Square Footages for the Spaces in a Jail Plan.* Faith Morrison presented her Excel spreadsheet numbers on what the sizes of various departmental spaces should be according to our jail consultants, Abonmarch/Byce. The consultants’ numbers only say total departmental NSF numbers (net square footages), based on a 51-bed jail. The number 51-beds comes from designing a building for the current average daily population of our jail, with inmate “classification” taken into account. Classification practices mean that men and women are housed separately, felons and misdemeanors, mental health holds, juvenile holds are all housed separately. The fact that the master-plan numbers are “total” makes it hard to assess the sizes of individual project areas. We need this detail to be able to see where cost savings could be found in the plan.

Morrison took the 51-bed design tables from the Abonmarch/Byce report and their numbers for appropriate sizes for offices, conference rooms, inmate housing, etc. and “back calculated” the sizes of individual spaces that need to grow to make our jail an appropriate size, according to the consultants. Her work is preliminary, but the Sheriff and Jail Captain Travis Dessellier said that they could take it from there and fill in missing parts and find the double counting and other errors, improvements that emerged from the meeting discussion.

The committee will discuss over email the progress made by the Sheriff and Jail Captain and then meet next on March 16 at 10am to discuss the subcommittee’s final report to the Jail Committee.

6. *What are construction costs running at?* Mike Hamilton asked if anyone knew what the cost of construction locally is running. Hamilton and Sheriff Saaranen will meet to discuss.
7. *There is interest in touring the Delta County Jail.* Several members would like to tour Delta’s jail as it is the newest in the UP. What we see will help us to give input to the jail/sheriff’s office design. The Sheriff will see if he can arrange that.
8. *Press Coverage TV 6* Reporter Colin Jackson attended the meeting and interviewed Saaranen and Morrison afterwards.

<https://www.uppermichiganssource.com/2026/02/11/houghton-county-sub-committee-discusses-space-needed-future-jail/>

### Upcoming meetings:

**(Open to the public; locations and credentials for online participation posted on the County’s website [houghtoncounty.net](http://houghtoncounty.net))**

3/2/26	County Board Work Session, 10am (5 <sup>th</sup> floor)
3/2/26	Jail Committee meeting, 4pm (5 <sup>th</sup> floor)
3/5/26	Sharon Avenue and Jail Property-Use Committee, 10am (5 <sup>th</sup> floor)
3/10/26	County Board Regular Meeting, 6pm (3 <sup>rd</sup> floor)
3/16/26	Jail Needs Subcommittee meeting, 10am (5 <sup>th</sup> floor)
4/6/26	County Board Work Session, 10am (5 <sup>th</sup> floor)
4/14/26	County Board Regular Meeting, 6pm (3 <sup>rd</sup> floor) <b>Reports due from all three jail-related committees</b>