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LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE COPPER COUNTRY

Addressing Issues with the Houghton County Jail

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Jail Discussion Update 7-29-2026

The following jail-related discussions have taken place since the 7/29/26 press release:
(some meeting recordings are posted at www.youtube.com/@CountyofHoughton)

7/30/2026	Jail Committee Meeting
8/3/2026	County Board Regular Work Session
8/5/2026	County Board Special Meeting
8/11/2026	County Board Regular Meeting

Summaries appear below.

The main topic of the **Jail Committee Meeting, July 30, 2026** was to review the ROMs (rough order of magnitude cost estimates) received from three contractors: Granger (\$25-\$28 million), Miron (\$27.8 million), and Bradway Enterprises (\$23.5 million). Derek Bradway and Leander Somero were present and indicated that their ROM did not contain engineering costs and that therefore \$1.2 million should be added in order to make their number more comparable to the other two. The committee discussed the three ROMs and passed a motion to recommend to the County Board that the County pursue a millage for \$28 million for building a new jail/sheriff's office.

The Committee also discussed the term of length of a bond to pay for the jail project. The jail bond project in 2025, which did not pass, asked for 1.6 mills to pay for a \$32 million project. The bond attorney consulted by the Board for a 2026 millage indicated that a \$28 million bond for 20 years would be 1.51 mills and a \$28 million bond for 30 years would be about 1.28 mills. Both are less than the 2025 number. The Committee voted to recommend to the board a 30-year bond length.

Jail Committee co-chair Faith Morrison raised a discussion of the yet-to-be-determined language on the bond question that would appear on the November 3, 2026 ballot. She noted that the standard, legal language used in 2025 had given some voters the impression that the County could do whatever they want with that money. Morrison advocated that the language be plain and simple and that it be clear what the County would do with the \$28 million if the millage passed. There was agreement to this suggestion. In the Bradway ROM they had also proposed simple bond language, with the same purpose in mind. The Committee voted to recommend to the County Board that they draft millage language based on the kind of plain language shown in the Bradway Enterprises ROM section 11, including a prioritized list of what the public will get with a yes vote. The vote was unanimous.

There were a number of public comments. One resident advocated for not building a new jail but using a trailer park instead. Another complemented the committee. And a third advocated that the County should follow what we all do when we buy a house and put 20% down and only borrow the 80%.

Details are in the posted minutes of the committee.

At the **County Board Regular Work Session, August 3, 2026** the jail question was not on the agenda, but in Public Comments Faith Morrison relayed the recommendations of the Jail Committee and explained the third recommendation that the language of the bond be plain and should commit the Board to the details of the proposed jail project. Chairman Tom Tikkanen discussed that it would be good if somehow the millage could be even lower than the Committee's recommendation (which was \$28 million, approximately 1.27 mills), perhaps 1 mill. This could perhaps be done if general fund money is available to reduce the total amount needed (the 20% down idea). Commissioner Anderson noted that since the 2025 audit was still not completed, it would be hard to determine if that could be done. Tikkanen will discuss the bond millage language with County Administrator Rheault and the bond attorneys.

The **County Board** held a **Special Meeting on August 5, 2026** with the express purpose of adopting bond language for the 2026 Jail Millage. Faith Morrison, co-chair of the Jail Committee, began her statement by thanking the three firms who had generously supplied ROMs: Bradway Enterprises, Granger, and Miron. The ROMs had allowed the process of getting to a new jail millage to move forward. Chairman Tikkanen concurred. Item 2 was the jail bond Resolution 26-15, which had been drafted by the County's bond attorneys, and which requested a 1.2722 mills, 30-year bond to pay for the jail. The language in Resolution 26-15 is almost the same as that used in 2025, indicating that they would not be using the plain language suggested by Morrison, and separately by Bradway. The Board discussed the Resolution, and after discussion, Resolution 26-15 passed the Board by a 3-0 vote (Anderson on MS Teams, Keranen absent). During the final Public Comments period of the meeting, Morrison thanked the Board for deciding to put the millage on the November ballot and expressed her support for updating the jail, a facility that has not been able to serve the County well for the last 26 years.

At the **County Board Regular Meeting, August 11, 2026** Board Chair Tom Tikkanen added to the agenda a proposed Resolution he had received from Morrison that was titled "*Plain Language County Jail and Sheriff's Operations Facility Millage Description.*"

During the Public Comments session of items on the agenda, Morrison explained her Resolution, which she drafted with the input of four other members of the Jail Committee. The Resolution was designed to give the Commissioners an opportunity to go on the record as to the Board's intentions with respect to the plans for the jail building project and the 2026 jail millage (copy of the Resolution, Resolution 26-18, is attached).

During Commissioners' reports, Commissioner Anderson complemented the Jail Committee for a job well done. He noted that the 2024 consultants had indicated a need for 52 beds and that the current jail has only 28. He is encouraged by the excitement shown by the local contractors during Industry Day.

Commissioner Keranen during his report said he wanted to echo what Commissioner Anderson had said about the work of the Jail Committee. He said that all five commissioners agree we need a new jail; where we disagree is in how to pay for it. The people will speak again. If they approve, great. If not, we need to listen to the people. This is the 5th time for a jail vote. He mentioned Commissioner Janssen's prior comment that the millage increase was the equivalent of the cost of a cup of coffee a week [correction: it is a cup of coffee a month], but in his view that's the taxpayer's choice if they want to contribute those funds to the project or not. Keranen noted comments online that oppose the jail project. He said the vote will determine if we have a jail project, and he repeated that "I do believe that it's easily known that we do need a new jail." He also noted that although he had not been able to be at the special meeting [that approved the millage], he does appreciate the hard work of the committees.

Commissioner Tikkanen said he too wished to congratulate the community and Jail Committee for bringing the ballot millage back on the November ballot. The Committees responded to the community's concerns from the last time we had it on the ballot. We thoroughly investigated the question if there were County assets that could be liquidated. That was done in a public process. He noted that the purchase of the 6-acres property on Sharon Avenue had been criticized, but that was done in a public process, as has been explained. Tikkanen said, we brought the estimated cost down by several million dollars. The discussions have had deep involvement of the populus. Our Jail Committee was people from all corners of the County and walks of life and had good representation of our community. The Jail Committee members are a good example of those who try to do something about a problem rather than saying no. Tikkanen said that even the neighbors of the outdated jail are likely unaware of the titanic struggle that goes on in that facility. We need a new jail. The other outcome is that the jail will be shut down by outside authorities, who will dictate how we run our jail. People say we've turned it down before, and yes that is true. We have to get a new jail at some point. This current proposal is as cost-effective as possible. Twenty years ago, when there was a millage, it was for \$3.3 million and that was for a much larger facility. If anyone's a fiscal conservative, it's me. This fiscal conservative is asking the community to realize that we have to have a new jail.

At 7pm the County reached agenda item 8 under new business, "*Resolution 26-18 Plain Language County Jail and Sheriff's Operations Facility Millage Description.*" Morrison went through the contents of her proposed Resolution, saying that compared to the 2025 millage language, this time around we want it more straightforward. The bond lawyers have insisted that the formal language is needed for legal reasons, and the formal language will appear on the ballot. The Resolution does not change anything in the previous Resolution 26-15 that set the ballot language. To aid the voting public to assess the value of the millage, this resolution, if the Board agrees, can be a plain-spoken description of aspects of the proposed Jail Build that the Board can put firmly into the public record. Chairman Tikkanen asked if there was support for Resolution 26-18? Commissioner Britz moved the resolution, seconded by Commissioner Anderson. There was no further discussion, and the motion passed by 4-1, with Commissioner Keranen dissenting.

During final Public Comments, Morrison noted that the last attempted Jail Committee meeting lacked a quorum, and the meeting was not held. A next Jail Committee meeting has been scheduled for Monday, August 17, 2026 at 4pm in the 5th floor conference room of the courthouse.

Upcoming meetings/events related to the jail project:

(Open to the public; online credentials at houghtoncounty.net)

The next meeting of the Jail Committee is Monday, August 17, 2026 at 4pm in the 5th floor conference room of the courthouse.

8/17/2026	Jail Committee Meeting, 4pm (5 th floor)
9/8/2026	County Board Regular Work Session
9/15/2026	County Board Regular Meeting, 6pm (3 rd floor courtroom)
9/24/2026	Absent Voter Ballots available for November 3 election
11/3/2026	Election Day