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Addressing Issues with the Houghton County Jail

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Jail Discussion Update 6-24-2026

The following jail-related discussions have taken place since the 6/8/26 press release:
(some meeting recordings are posted at www.youtube.com/@CountyofHoughton)

6/9/2026	Jail Committee Meeting (with Moyle representative)
6/9/2026	County Board Regular Meeting
6/23/2026	Jail Committee Meeting

Summaries appear below.

At the June 9, 2026 Jail Committee Meeting the main topic was discussion with Andrew Kemper from Moyle Construction. Kemper said that when Moyle is working with their private-sector clients, the most cost-effective arrangement is the design/build system. In this arrangement the client can save on administrative costs that are otherwise present when a general contractor subcontracts parts of the job. In design/build the general contractor works with preferred subcontractors and arranges the financing and that is also a source of income for them. Kemper said that, increasingly, local and regional school systems, highway departments and local road commissions are realizing the advantages of the design/build system. There were some discussions about the source and magnitude of the cost savings that Kemper mentioned and a lively back and forth between the committee members and Kemper. The committee passed a resolution as a recommendation to the Board of Commissioners as follows “that the Jail Committee supports the county board seeking more information on a design/build pathway, information on leaseback arrangements, information on the process for such collaborations, and what steps are appropriate for the county to pursue appropriate due diligence in committing public funds for the jail through these pathways.” Kemper had noted that Moyle needs the County’s audited financial statements from 2025 in order to give a cost estimate; the audited statements are estimated to be available in two weeks. Moyle will need another two weeks to work up their estimate.

At the June 9, 2026 County Board Regular Meeting the only discussion of the jail project was the report on the events of the June 9, 2026 meeting of the Jail Committee (above) and a reading of the recommendation that passed (above).

At the June 23, 2026 Jail Committee Meeting (chaired by Faith Morrison) member Tom Tikkanen reported that he had been contacted by email by Dan Leveque, the president emeritus of Gundlach Champion, about their interest in the jail construction job. Tikkanen invited Gundlach Champion to send a representative to the Jail Committee meeting, but due to a time conflict, no one was present. Tikkanen reported that the County Board is meeting Thursday June 25 at 11am to hold a special meeting to discuss some grant business and that he had asked that the jail project be added to the agenda as well. Tikkanen said that the County Board needs some direction in terms of where to go from here, for example, how to

reach out to other contractors. Faith Morrison noted that the Jail Committee had recommended input from local firms in the form of an “Industry Day.” Justin LaCosse, who had brought this idea to the Jail Committee, spoke on it and said that what could result from an Industry Day would be a ROM (rough order estimate) and an exchange of views on the project and how it could be structured with the contractors. The ROMs that come from the Industry Day exercise could lead to discussions of where the costs were and thereby the project could be modified to save cost while achieving the county’s goals. Morrison spoke several times about “million-dollar” engineering work in the conventional path, since the committee had been made to understand that full engineering bid documents would cost between \$1 million and \$2 million dollars if contracted for in the usual way. The committee sought to understand the design/build process and to compare it to the conventional process and to determine the differences between the two, both in terms of costs, but also in terms of what is delivered and how. The committee remains concerned that the process be open, as all public works projects must be, and be awarded fairly and legally.

The discussion ranged on a variety of topics with the committee members seeking to both understand what the options were and also how the various choices impacted the public’s perception and attitude towards paying for a new jail. Tikkanen expressed that there will always be those who are opposed to the jail project, and there was agreement on this. Although Tikkanen and some others present needed to leave the meeting early, the discussion proceeded with an urgency born of the looming deadline for getting a jail millage on the November 3 ballot (deadline is 4pm August 11).

The group focused on millage language, seeking to find a way to present the jail, the need for the jail, and the need for funds for the jail, to the public. They focused in on telling the public “*What you will get if you vote yes for a jail millage.*” This led to an exercise in which those present, in a brainstorming mode, listed what amounted to 28 aspects of the jail that would be attached to the new build.

The second thing the group focused on was following up on the Industry Day idea, putting down dates and a timeline towards having such a day in mid-July. The County Board would need to vote to initiate the Industry Day idea, and the committee agreed that the special Board meeting on Thursday June 25 would be the only time for them to do so. Once Industry Day has been authorized by the Board, several meetings of the Jail Committee would take place and there would be a back and forth with the Board, then the Industry Day would take place, the Board would get feedback from that process, and then the Board could craft millage language and put the millage before the public.

As they closed the meeting, the Committee set its own meeting dates that would work with the plan they had sketched out, and Morrison committed to getting the summary of the discussion to Tikkanen and Janssen to bring to the Board on Thursday at the special meeting.

Upcoming meetings:

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

6/25/2026 County Board **Special** Meeting, 11am (5th floor)

6/29/2026 Jail Committee Meeting, 4pm (5th floor)

7/6/2026 County Board Regular Work Session—Devoted to the jail, 10am (5th floor)

7/7/2026 Jail Committee Meeting, 4pm (5th floor)

7/14/2026 County Board Regular Meeting, 6pm (3rd floor courtroom)