

**PRESS RELEASE LWVCC, March 25, 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.
- 4-14-2026 Deadline for three jail-related committees' reports to the Board of Commissioners

**Status report 3-25-2026**

There were several jail-related discussions since the 2/12/26 press release:

- 3/2/26 County Board Work Session, 10am  
3/2/26 Jail Committee meeting, 4pm  
3/5/26 ~~Sharon Avenue Committee meeting~~, CANCELLED  
3/10/16 County Board Regular meeting, 6pm  
3/16/26 ~~Jail Needs Subcommittee, 10am~~, CANCELLED due to blizzard  
3/23/26 Joint Jail Committee/Jail Needs Subcommittee meeting, 4pm

**At the County Board's March work session**, brief updates were heard from jail committee chairs related to preparing their reports for the April meeting. The minutes seem to indicate that appropriate progress in the committees' work is being made.

**The March 2, 2026 meeting of the Jail Committee** included the following discussions/advances.

1. *Update on the social media efforts of the committee.* A Facebook page has been started and there are some posts and some feedback from the public.
2. *Request through Congressman Bergman for Federal funds for engineering plan costs (up to \$2 million).* Dan Holcomb spearheaded identifying this program and pulling together the needed application that was due Friday November 3, 2026 to Bergman's office. The application was submitted on time. The funds, if awarded, may become available in 2027.

3. *Jail Needs Subcommittee Report* – the Sheriff and his team, with the help of the Subcommittee, agreed to work to create a breakdown of spaces in the proposed new jail, as best as they are able. They will prioritize this work so that the Subcommittee can discuss and report on their recommendations to the Jail Committee.
4. *Heard that Commissioner Janssen is planning to tour the Delta County Jail* (and she has done so).
5. *Reviewed the current timeline for the jail project.* Once the needs are identified for the design, the engineering work needs to be let out for proposals and that work done; this work is thought to take four months, and this makes having a November millage a bit rushed. From the minutes: *“The language for a November millage is due by August 8, 2026 by 4:00 pm per Clerk Kelly. This is before the August regular County Board meeting which is 6pm the same day; thus, the last regular meeting to approve a millage for November is July. A special meeting could be called, however.”*
6. *Added Andrea Johnson from Treatment Court to the Subcommittee.* Her expertise in diversion programs (programs that reduce jail populations by directing some offenders to different paths other than incarceration) is welcomed by the committee.

**At the County Board’s Regular March meeting** the board Engaged OHM for \$20,000 to do an engineering plan in the former church building on Sharon Avenue as described in the RFP on the County’s website. The goal of this plan is to seek the maximum re-use of this building. The Board wants to address the public’s concern that the building not be wasted/torn down. Two major issues with the building are: 1) avoiding having to install sprinklers (very expensive) by effectively splitting the building into two with a firewall, and 2) addressing the snow load on the roof.

**The March 23, 2026 joint meeting of the Jail Committee and the Jail Needs Subcommittee** included the following discussions/advances.

1. Commissioner Janssen reported on her tour of the Delta County jail. It does not resemble our jail at all – there is a great deal of space for the officers to work in. Seems inherently more safe. Janssen will be preparing a report for the board.
2. The committees once again discussed social media efforts to share information with the public and to get feedback from the public.
3. Jail Committee chair Hyrkas spoke about obtaining a “near schematic design” or a “conceptional design” as an important next step in the planning process.
4. Sheriff Saaranen and Jail Captain Desselier reported on their efforts to specify square footages in a jail design. They feel that this is not their expertise—they run a jail but they are not the experts to design one. The committee discussed that the “near schematic design” discussed above is the kind of professional document that needs to be created with input from the jail team, but that creating such a design is not in their wheelhouse.
5. Discussed square footages in the jail design, referencing the tables Faith Morrison had previously presented to the committee that were created from the master plan documents. The master plan indicates how much larger the consultants thought the space for each department should be. The group’s discussion of square footages was

deep and serious with the committee members asking questions and working together to see what the committees could do to bring the information from the AbonmarchByce consultants closer to the desired conceptual design. The Committee/Subcommittee members agreed that the public wants cuts – a smaller, less expensive project – but it is not clear how to get to that. There was discussion of involving local contractors. Once the conceptual design is determined, the bidding process can take place and that's when we will know how much the jail will really cost. It was agreed that the public would be very much in favor of strong involvement of local contractors, local jobs.

6. Andrea Johnson (Treatment Court) brought the committees members up to speed on remote screening of inmates. This process could identify people that should be incarcerated pretrial and those who could safely be released and monitored. Currently when our jail is full we release prisoners but we do not have a process based on current best practices and we could definitely move towards that with Johnson now on the Houghton County team. Marquette is releasing a large number of their inmates due to their overcrowding, and Johnson can perhaps report again to the group on how the Marquette jail is doing with its new remote screening activities. If we improve/expand our release process, this will reduce the size of a future jail.
7. SubCommittee report to the Jail Committee. The Jail Committee wants square footage numbers from the SubCommittee but that is not going to be possible. The best that this group can do is to share Morrison's tables along with the supporting pages from the various AbonmarchByce documents (the master plan) so that the Jail Committee can deliberate on its recommendations to the County Board.
8. Jail Scenarios for Social Media—Captain Dessellier has one new scenario he's working. There has not been progress on transferring his four existing scenarios – which do an excellent job of demonstrating the problems with operating in the current jail – to videos for social media sharing. Valorie Troesch volunteered to find someone to do videos (Note: after the meeting she did find someone and has started the process of getting videos made).
9. Jail Tour: After the meeting Morrison, Sundstrom, LaCosse, Janssen joined the Sheriff and Captain Dessellier in a jail tour.

**Summary:** Efforts to communicate with the public on the jail project are ongoing (scenario videos, Troesch; report on Delta Jail, Janssen); Emphasize to the Board the need for a schematic design; schematic design is not something the SubCommittee can create, however. Prepare final report to the Jail Committee (Morrison's tables; recommendation to involve local contractors). The Jail committee is on track to be able to report to the board in April.

**Upcoming meetings:**

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

4/2/26	Jail Needs Subcommittee meeting, 11am (5 <sup>th</sup> floor)
4/6/26	County Board Work Session, 10am (5 <sup>th</sup> floor)
4/6/26	Jail Committee meeting, 4pm (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>