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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 09-30-2026

The following jail-related discussions have been scheduled or have taken place since the 09/06/2026 LWVCC press release: (some meeting recordings are posted at www.youtube.com/@CountyofHoughton)

9/3/2026	Letter from Copper Country Republican Party sent to County Board endorsing a “No” vote on the 2026 Jail Millage
9/13/2016	Letter from Houghton County Democratic Party sent to County Board endorsing a “Yes” vote on the 2026 Jail Millage
September 2026	“Coffee with the Sheriff” events held
9/15/2026	County Board Regular Meeting (Resolution 26-20 passed)

Summaries appear below.

Copper Country Republican Party Endorses “No” vote on 2026 Jail Millage (letter attached)

On September 8, 2026, the chairman of the Copper Country Republican Party, Dan Holcomb, wrote to the County Board and attached a letter that indicated the reasons that the CCRP was opposing the 2026 Jail millage. Holcomb indicated that he wanted the full letter entered into the public record.

In their letter, the CCRP:

- Conveyed respect for the Board, Sheriff’s Office, and citizens who have given substantial time to the work in the jail matter
- Expressed gratitude for how CCRP members were received, heard, and were able to observe the work as it proceeded. The meetings of the jail-related committees were described as open and courteous.
- Acknowledged that the existing jail is no longer suited to the County’s responsibilities and that the need for a proper facility is not contested.

Holcomb indicates several reasons for their group’s decision not to support the millage:

- Generational obligation. The 30-year millage obligates households through the middle of the 21st century, an undesirably long time. This could be avoided by limiting the project or reducing the principal needed (costs).
- Presence of County Assets. The County Board’s 2026 decision (by 4-1 vote) not to sell County assets such as Canal View, the marina, the transfer station and other properties to raise principal for the jail project meant that the full cost of the jail/sheriff’s office would go to the taxpayers.

- Opposition of the Board to House Bill 4583. The County Board opposed a bill that would have only allowed property millages in November (and not at other election dates such as August, which was used for a jail millage in 2025). This indicates to the CCRP that the jail millage may keep coming back, particularly at elections with smaller turnouts, and they oppose this.

Holcomb's letter on behalf of the CCRP is attached and may be reviewed in full.

Houghton County Democratic Party Endorses "Yes" vote on 2026 Jail Millage (letter attached)

On September 13, 2026, the chair of the Houghton County Democratic Party, William Keith, wrote to the County Board and attached a public letter that indicated the reasons that the HCDP was endorsing the 2026 Jail millage.

In their letter, the HCDP:

- Acknowledged that households in Houghton County are financially strained in 2026 and could oppose, in good faith, any tax increase for any purpose
- Expressed concern for the urgency of the need for a new jail, a need they feel is universally understood in the County. Keith calls the jail unsafe for those who work there, those who are housed there, and for those who pass through. He calls out the poor condition of the nurse's station, the lack of ability to appropriately separate different types of inmates, and poor working conditions for the officers and staff.

Keith indicates several reasons for their group's decision to support the millage:

- Costs on a yearly basis are modest and lower due to the length of the bond. Homeowners whose house is at the median of taxable value in Houghton County will see a tax increase of under \$39 per year due to the jail millage. A shorter millage would have a larger annual tax increase of \$63 per year, \$24/yr more than the 30-year option. The longer millage will spread out the cost of the jail to taxpayers who will use the jail, as the expected life of the jail is more than 40 years.
- Selling County Assets was explored and came up short. Selling an asset such as Canal View does not simply raise money; it also deprives County residents of that facility. In his letter Keith summarizes the findings of the County-Held Properties Committee, which found few funds would be generated by the proposed sales. Keith describes significant negative impacts from selling County assets, including losing its nursing home, losing its nearby and low-cost construction-waste system, and losing a public park in the form of the marina.
- A jail is needed now and the current plan balances cost and need. Keith cites the costing work done by local contractors during Industry Day as allowing confidence that an appropriate jail can be built by the requested \$28 million. The openness of the recent set of jail discussions addresses the public's demand to be included in the process and to understand the need.

Keith's letter on behalf of the HCDP is attached and may be reviewed in full.

During the September 15, 2026 meeting of the Board of Commissioners of Houghton County the jail millage endorsements were brought up during public comment. In addition, the Board considered, and passed, a statement that the Board endorses a 70-bed minimum jail, due to concerns raised by the Sheriff. More details are below.

During the **Public Comment** periods of the **September 15, 2026 meeting of the Board of Commissioners** of Houghton County, a number of speakers addressed the jail millage issue.

- William Keith (HoCo Dems for the millage)
- Valorie Troesch (LWVCC support for Addendum #1)
- Teresa Kariniemi, (against the millage)
- Katie LaCosse (for the millage)
- Dan Holcomb (CC Republicans against the millage)
- Faith Morrison (for the millage)

Plain Language Addendum #1 Passed by Board of Commissioners (9/15/2026)

As a follow up to the County Board Plain Language Resolution on the jail millage (Resolution 26-18), Faith Morrison, co-chair of the Jail Committee submitted a resolution “Addendum #1 Resolution 26-20” which was considered by the Board, and passed, at their September 15th meeting,

As stated in the resolution, the purpose of Addendum #1 is to explicitly commit the County Board to the minimum capacity of the housing spaces in the proposed jail build going before the voters in November. On August 11, 2026, the County Board passed Resolution 26-18, which specified that *at least* 60 housing beds would be included in the jail build. Proposed Addendum #1 specifies that the minimum number of beds will be 70. Morrison stated that, in conversations with the Sheriff, it has become clear that he has serious concerns that a 60-bed build will be too small to address the needs of Houghton County for the 40+ years the proposed new jail is expected to serve the County. Morrison said that if the Board is moving towards a larger jail due to the Sheriff’s concerns, it would be best for the Board share with the public the new plans, and why the plans have changed. The proposed Addendum #1 Resolution specifies the reasons that the Board supports the larger number of beds (a minimum of 70 rather than 60). A great deal is being asked of the public on November 3rd, and the public has been clear that it wants to be kept up to date on jail design issues.

After Morrison’s presentation of the Resolution, a motion was made by Commissioner Britz and seconded by Commissioner Janssen to approve Resolution #26-20 as presented. The motion passed by the following vote (Resolution attached).

YES: Britz, Janssen, Tikkanen, Anderson (total = 4).

NO: Keranen (total = 1).

Coffee with Sheriff Saaranen Events (8/27/2026)

Members of the Jail Committee, working with Sheriff Josh Saaranen, scheduled six “Coffee with Sheriff Saaranen” events at the Houghton County Jail in September.

Members of the public were invited to sit down to coffee with the Sheriff and committee members in the conference room of the Houghton County Jail, 403 E. Sharon Avenue, Houghton. These were casual events, and there were no presentations. Those who wished to, toured the jail. Events continue through October and November (handout attached).

**Upcoming meetings/events related to the jail project:
(Open to the public; online credentials at houghtoncounty.net)**

The next assembly of the County Board is its regular monthly work session on October 5, followed by its regular meeting on October 13, 2026.

10/2026	Coffee with Sheriff Saaranen (see schedule attached)
10/05/2026	County Board Work Session, 10am (5 th floor conference room)
10/13/2026	County Board Regular meeting, 6pm (3 rd floor courtroom)
11/3/2026	Election Day