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LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE COPPER COUNTRY

Addressing Issues with the Houghton County Jail

Faith Morrison, *Advocate for Addressing HoCo Jail Issues*
fmorriso9@yahoo.com, cell: 906-487-9703
website: lwwccmi.org

Special Topic: Two Congressionally Directed Spending Requests Submitted for Engineering Costs related to the Houghton County Jail Project

The Houghton County Jail Committee has pursued Federal funding for expenses in design engineering work for a new Houghton County Jail. Federal funding is available through Congressionally Directed Spending Requests that are submitted by a region’s U.S. Representative and U.S. Senators. Two requests were submitted this year, one through Representative Jack Bergman’s office and a second through Senator Elissa Slotkin’s office.

History

First submission (Representative Bergman)

On December 8, 2025, Jail Committee member Dan Holcomb invited Colin Gwillim from Representative Jack Bergman’s Office to attend the committee meeting to discuss what federal grants may be available to assist the County in building a jail. From the minutes of that meeting: “[Gwillim] stated there is potential funding for a community project through **Congressionally Directed Spending**. It is a community facility program for rural areas [**FY 2027 Community Project Funding Requests**], and jails are an approved project type. This happens one (1) time per year through an Appropriation Committee. The Appropriation Committee accepts application in January or February 2026 and then would hope to recommend funding the project for the next fiscal year in the fall [Fall 2027].”

The Jail Committee agreed that this idea was worth pursuing. At the January 5, 2026 Jail Committee meeting there was a discussion of what should be the “ask” for the request, and it was determined that engineering work towards the jail design of up to \$2 million would be appropriate and would best advance the campaign to address the problems with the Houghton County Jail. Holcomb agreed to spearhead the application process.

Over several months Holcomb completed the application with input from the Jail Committee and the Congressman’s office and submitted it to Congressman Bergman’s website in March 2026 with two letters of support:

1. 97th District Court Judge Nicholas Daavettila and Houghton County Prosecutor Daniel Helmer
2. Houghton County Sherrif Josh Saaranen

Second Submission (Senator Slotkin)

On March 25, 2026, Jail Committee member Valorie Troesch spoke with Jay Gage, Senator Slotkin's U.P. representative, about opportunities for federal funding for the Houghton County jail project, specifically, funds to help with engineering/architectural development plans. She indicated to Gage that a similar proposal was submitted to Rep. Bergman's office for \$2 million.

Troesch learned that there are federal funding opportunities available through Senator Slotkin, through the **FY27 Congressionally Directed Spending** program, but the deadline for grant submission was rapidly approaching (deadline = 11:59 pm Monday, March 31, 2026). Gage said that a proposal for \$1 million would be appropriate for engineering development of the jail project.

Troesch contacted other members of the Jail Committee and folks interested in supporting the Houghton County jail project and volunteered to coordinate the submission of a request. She was able to obtain five letters of support:

1. Houghton County Board of Commissioners
2. 97th District Court Judge Nicholas Daavettila and Houghton County Prosecutor Daniel Helmer
3. Houghton County Sherrif Josh Saaranen
4. Chief Public Defender David Gemignani from Tri-County Public Defenders
5. Co-Presidents Faith Morrison and Linda Belote, League of Women Voters of the Copper Country

Troesch submitted the request through Senator Slotkin's online portal on March 28, 2026.

Both requests are for fiscal year 2027 monies and the proposals went to federal programs that are highly competitive. The projects that receive funding will be notified in 2027.

In both submissions, a good case was made for the need for the engineering plans. The public has expressed that it will only support a jail building project that is clear, economical, and sufficiently well planned; getting to this level of design requires the kind of engineering work proposed. Frank and open conversations with the public are needed to move forward with a solution to address the issues with the Houghton County Jail.

The letter of support from the League of Women Voters of the Copper Country is appended.



March 26, 2026

To Whom it May Concern,

On behalf of the League of Women Voters of the Copper Country we are writing to support the **FY 2027 Community Project Funding Request** addressing engineering and design cost for a new Houghton County Jail (Houghton, Michigan). The request is for the much-needed funds to cover essential steps towards building a new jail and sheriff's office to replace the 1963 jail that is currently in place.

Houghton County has needed a new jail for a long time, and the LWV of the Copper Country has been working with the Houghton County Board and other stakeholders to address this problem for three decades. We are a vibrant rural community that has seen recent growth after decades of struggle after our signature copper mining industry declined and then disappeared from our community in the 1960s. We are caught in a bind—the jail is an expensive investment for our community, but we struggle to afford the engineering and design work that would allow us to build community support for this long-term investment.

Four different plans for a new jail have gone before the electorate and failed in the last 25 years (2000, 2011, 2018, and 2025). Each design was different and an attempt to convince the public of the need and merits of each design. The failure of these ballot measures indicate that the voters need more details and more input in order to support what is now a likely \$35 million project.

The proposed *Community Project Funding* would assist Houghton County by providing **\$1 million in funds** for engineering and design work that would specify sizes and spaces to be included in the project and their associated costs and tradeoffs. This detailed engineering work is absolutely essential to the ultimate project of convincing the electorate to fund the new facility. The community's participation in examining the design plan, weighing in, and making compromises to reduce costs, is essential community work without which we are unlikely to succeed in the fifth time the County requests funds for the needed jail.

The current jail was built in 1963 and has been expanded into the former living quarters of the sheriff that were once part of the facility. The jail is older than the computer revolution, and updating and maintaining technology-related updates is one of the problems with the jail. As more than 6 decades have passed, it has been increasingly difficult to keep up with advances in corrections policy and standards. The working spaces of our jail facility require many rooms to serve two or three or four purposes, causing the jail staff to have to juggle the various things that are happening at any one time. This is a recipe for incidents, is inherently unsafe, and it has only been through the diligence and talents of our current jail staff that we have avoided a serious incident in the last several decades. To be proactive in providing essential jail services to Houghton County, we need a new jail.

As a non-partisan community group that has been active in the community since 1960, the League of Women Voters of the Copper Country is in an excellent position to comment on the jail situation in our county—the need is urgent, and allocating the requested funds would have a significant impact throughout our region. We urge you to award this funding.

Sincerely,



Faith A. Morrison
Co-President



Linda Belote
Co-President

***League of Women Voters of the Copper Country
P. O. Box 815, Houghton, MI 49931***