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Addressing Issues with the Houghton County Jail

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Historical Timeline

11-4-2025	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. Overall goal: <i>Develop a jail plan that the public can support.</i> Focus is on what the public is saying about why they did not support the 2025 millage and addressing those issues

Status report 2-2-2026 "Comments from the Public"

Issue: "Find another way to fund the jail"

Actions: **County-Held Properties Committee** is looking into the value of four county-held properties that could be sold, all or in part, to fund a new jail. The **County Board** has authorized appraisal of Canal View and a survey of the HoCo Marina to see what these properties are worth. The **County-Held Properties Committee** has had discussions of the value of the HoCo Transfer Station and the Airport and related properties. *There is a need for a "report out" of these discussions to the Board and the public.*

Actions: **The Jail Committee** has spoken with a representative from Congressman Bergman's office to see if there are federal funds that might subsidize the building of a new jail. There are possible funds in the \$500,000 to \$2 million range but it is highly competitive nationwide for these funds (earmarks). There was discussion of asking for funds for developing the engineering plans (ongoing discussions). *There is a need for updates on these efforts to the Board and the public.*

Issue: "We object to the process used to purchase the Sharon Avenue property ("the church")"

Actions: The **Jail Committee** and its subcommittee the **Jail Needs Subcommittee**, and the **Sharon Avenue and Jail Property Committee** have all discussed this issue. *There is a need to prepare a history of the purchase of the property and its funding with County ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds and discuss this with the public. There is a need to settle on the location of the investment in a suitable jail and sheriff's office.*

Issue: "We should not tear down the church. That would be a waste of money."

Actions: What to do with the church building on the Sharon Avenue property has been discussed by the **Sharon Avenue and Jail Property Committee**. It has been discussed that renovating the church building for any uses by the County would likely cost millions of dollars and would result in spaces that are not as suitable as could be built after demolishing the church. On 1/29/26, having heard feedback from the public, the **Sharon Avenue and Jail Property Committee** voted to rescind their previous recommendation to demolish the church and voted instead that they recommend to the **County Board** that a RFP (request for proposals) be created to see what it would cost to ask an engineering firm to cost out installing a three-hour fire wall to separate the kitchen addition from the sanctuary, stabilize the roof for snow load, and remodel the kitchen addition to office space and the sanctuary space for storage. Space thus created could be used by the County for whatever purposes it likes; the jail/sheriff's office could be built on the back of the property. *The County Board will likely take up discussion of the committee's resolution on 2/10/26 at their regular meeting.*

Issue: "Why can't the county just fix the problems with the current jail? That would be cheaper."

Actions: The **Jail Needs Subcommittee** has discussed this issue with the Sheriff and his staff. Issues of routine maintenance of the 1963 jail building are addressed continuously. The building was built 61 years ago and there have been updates over the years to address needs of the sheriff's office and the jail. Houghton County has also changed significantly over 61 years with an increase in drugs crimes and in more serious crimes as well as an increase in the need for housing for females and juveniles. The Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) and US and Michigan standards related to jails have also changed, placing additional demands on the HoCo Jail and staff. As a result of these changes, there is a need for more housing (cells) in the jail, but more significantly, there is a need for larger spaces for the core activities of the jail including: booking, programs, detoxification, and medical, among many needs. Any significant renovations on the current jail that exceed a certain cost would require that all the issues with the jail be addressed. In the current jail, the housing units surround the other areas, making it impossible to increase the sizes of those spaces, booking area especially.

The consultants from Abonmarch/Byce who assessed the HoCo jail in 2024 indicated that the departments of the Sheriff's office and the Jail both need more space, in some cases by **more than four times as much space**. To service the current average daily population (ADP) of our Houghton County jail, while following the MDOC rules (including proper classification of prisoners, that is, separating different types of inmates), the departmental spaces in the sheriff's office/jail should increase in size by the multipliers shown in red in the attached table (Reference: Created by Faith Morrison using the data in the Abonmarch/Byce Houghton County Master Plan prepared for the 2024 discussion of the jail).

Source: Houghton County Master Plan Charette version 2-22-25 page 60 "Existing Space Evaluation Summary"		Current Net Sq Ft (NSF)	Rating (from 1-2 unacceptable to 9-10 appropriate)	Adjusted NSF (how big a 51 inmate jail should be)	Adjusted NSF/Current NSF (how many times larger the current space should be for current ADP with classification)	Adjusted DGSF (Dept Gross) (DGF applied)	Departmental grossing factor, DGF, back-calculated
I.	Sheriff's office						
A	Public	274	3.0	1,088	4.0	1,251	1.15
B	Exec Admin	1,674	4.9	2,344	1.4	3,047	1.30
C	Road Patrol	2,381	3.0	4,350	1.8	5,655	1.30
D	Investigations	1,138	2.9	2,708	2.4	3,520	1.30
E	Marine/ORV/Snowmobile	2,042	10.0	2,000	1.0	2,200	1.10
	subtotal	7,509		12,490	1.7	15,673	
	average rating:		4.8				
II.	Corrections						
F	Administration	216	1.6	933	4.3	1,213	1.30
G	Intake/Booking	653	2.4	2,234	3.4	2,904	1.30
H	Medical	98	1.0	588	6.0	764	1.30
I	Confinement Housing	2,366	5.2	5,070	2.1	7,098	1.40
J	Program	663	1.2	1,725	2.6	2,415	1.40
K	Kitchen/Laundry	647	2.5	1,410	2.2	1,622	1.15
	subtotal	4,643		11,960	2.6	16,016	
	average rating:		2.3				
III.	Support						
L	Support	899	2.6	2,288	2.5	2,517	1.10
	subtotal	899		2,288	2.5	2,517	
	average rating:		2.6				
	TOTAL Departments sq ft:	13,051		26,738		34,206	
	overall rating (av of avg's)		3.2				
	Building Gross Sq ft (BGSF), +10%			additional 10%:	3,421	37,627	BGSF, adjusted
	Existing BGSF:					16,448	BGSF, existing
	ADP=Average Daily Population						
	<i>Faith Morrison 1/30/2026</i>						

Issue: "Jail discussions and plans are happening in secret."

The complex issue of the problems with the Houghton County Jail are being discussed in open meetings, and there is a call-out to the public to attend, listen in, speak at public comments, or send their comments to the County Board and the subcommittees. Note that the feedback received from the public on the church building demolition has resulted in the committee changing its recommendation. There are four meetings in the next two weeks.

Upcoming meetings:

(Open to the public; locations and credentials for online participation posted on the County's website houghtoncounty.net)

2/2/26	County Board Work Session, 10am (5 th floor)
2/2/26	Jail Committee, 4pm (5 th floor)
2/10/26	County Board Regular Meeting, 6pm (3 rd floor)
2/11/26	Jail Needs Subcommittee Meeting, 9:30am (5 th floor)