

# Obstacle to passing jail millage is lack of public input

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FEB 24, 2018

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Readers of the Daily Mining Gazette know that overcrowding issues in the Houghton County jail are a current concern and our County Board commissioners and Sheriff Brian McLean have been diligently seeking solutions to this problem. As reported in the Gazette on Feb. 16 and 17, the commissioners, working with UP Engineers & Architects, are closing in on a modestly designed solution to address the overcrowding problem.

A millage will need to be passed to pay for the proposed addition, and language for such a millage is being developed. Although we are relieved the jail issue is receiving this attention, the League of Women Voters of the Copper Country see a problem developing here.

What readers might not know is the long history of the Houghton County Jail and County Courthouse. A brief look through this history can help us to understand why jail millages have been so difficult to pass and may indicate the path proposed by our current commissioners may also face this problem.

The problem has been a pattern of avoiding input from the public that is responsible for the public refusing to sign on to Houghton County Jail projects.

The Houghton County Courthouse was designed by Marquette Architect J. B. Sweatt and dedicated July 28, 1887, making the courthouse 131 years old. The courthouse was declared a National Historical Place in 1975.

In July 1960 the Circuit Court ordered the jail closed within seven months due to lack of fire protection and escape routes, lack of segregation of prisoners with different criminal offenses, inadequate female facilities and insufficient ventilation.

To raise funds to comply with the Circuit Court order, two millage votes were held, both of which failed (Nov. 8, 1960, and Jan. 16, 1961).

The jail closed on Feb. 20, 1961, necessitating transfer of all prisoners to Marquette and Baraga, and incurring for the county exorbitant costs for housing and processing of prisoners.

This unfortunate situation only resolved when a millage for the current jail passed on Aug. 7, 1962, with the jail opening in 1963).

The 1963 jail met county needs for only 18 years. In 1981 the jail was remodeled to add cell space. In 1986 the courthouse parking structure was added and some limited renovations to the courthouse were completed.

Ten years later, continued overcrowding led to the opening of the work camp at the Houghton County Airport in 1991. The work camp did not alleviate the overcrowding for long, and the County Board once again confronted the need to expand the jail, but it has not been able to secure a millage to fund a solution. Two more failed millage ballots were held, one in 2000 and one in 2010.

The common thread of the failed jail millages has been a failure to engage the public in the planning process for the proposed solution. The citizens of Houghton County have a strong interest in many issues that the jail situation touches: what is mandated for the jail, how the courthouse will be affected, costs of construction, staffing costs, safety issues for workers in the courthouse, the impact of jail location, and transparency of county decision-making processes.

The five jail millage campaigns over the last 58 years did include advertising efforts to sell the solutions, but what was inadequate was the effort to engage and involve county citizens in the form and scope of the solutions.

The result is not unexpected: the electorate rejected all but one of the millages, responding positively only after violations forced the closure of the jail.

We can learn from this situation. A sustainable and supported solution to the problems at the Houghton County Jail and Courthouse is best developed in partnership with county citizens. The linked issues of the inadequate jail, limited and less than desirable staffing levels in the Sheriff's Office, and the working conditions in the historic courthouse itself, need to be considered simultaneously.

The sensible way is to host open meetings where engaged citizens can bring their concerns. When such meetings are not held, some voices are heard, but the broad input of a wide range of voices is lost.

Without a process that includes these voices, the likely outcome will be great difficulty in selling the solution. And another "*crisis*" will occur within a short period of time.

The League of Women Voters of the Copper Country calls on the Houghton County Board to seek broad public comment and input to the discussions about the jail solution. We invite like-minded civic groups of all types to join us in this call.

It is only with the consent of the governed that we can satisfactorily address a large-scale public problem such as the inadequacy of the Houghton County Jail.

Faith Morrison is a board member of the Copper Country League of Women Voters.