



HOUGHTON COUNTY INDUSTRY DAY

**Franklin Township Hall,
49850 HIGHWAY, US-41
Hancock, MI 49930**

July 15, 2026 – 5:00-7:00 PM

Introduction

Welcome to Houghton County Industry Day. This event has been organized to address the following charge:

To produce a rough order of magnitude (ROM) estimated cost for building a jail at the Sharon Avenue property that has space to house no fewer than 60 (and up to 70) detainees and that contains working spaces sufficient in size for serving that number of inmates. Specific spaces to be included are indicated in this document. The goal is to produce a new jail and sheriff's office that meets these requirements at a cost that the taxpayers can support.

History

The current jail was built in 1963 and has been renovated multiple times. It currently has 28 beds, which is inadequate for the average daily population of the Houghton County Jail. The Abonmarch/Byce consultants hired by the current county board in 2025 calculated that the jail size needed by the County was no fewer than 51 beds, as that is the number of beds that will allow the County to house its current average daily population while simultaneously adhering to classification rules.

The overcrowding and unsafe conditions in the jail have led Houghton County to put forward four jail millages in the past 26 years. Each building plan was unique. In 2000 a plan was proposed for 34 beds and 21 work camp beds. Work camp beds can only be assigned to inmates that qualify in terms of their offence (non-violent, non-sex-offender) and who are judged low risk. There are currently no inmates in the Houghton County Jail that qualify for work camp housing. The millage in 2000 was voted down by 3:1.

In 2010 the County Board put forward a more comprehensive plan for addressing the issues with the jail and sheriff's office: 110 beds plus 21 work camp beds with expanded sheriff's offices (including all support activities) to support this larger

structure. The location was across Dodge Street on the land formerly occupied by Houghton High School. This millage too was voted down by 3:1.

In 2018 with no input from the public the County Board sought to build the smallest possible structure to address the inadequate number of inmate beds in the current jail. They designed a 55-bed addition to the Courthouse as a new housing unit and made no changes to the undersized and unsuitable working spaces in the old jail. With these compromises, the estimated cost of the addition was \$11 million. This was put before the voters and also failed, but it was a close vote (49% in favor).

After the third failed millage, the County Board took a new approach, seeking broad input from the public. They formed a Jail Task Force to address concerns voiced by members of the public about the three previous plans. The minutes of the 2018 Jail Task Force are posted on the County’s website. One of the recommendations of the Taskforce was to locate a new jail/sheriff’s office within the city of Houghton but not in the downtown area. The Board set about finding a location on which to build a new jail/sheriff’s office and investigated several properties. A suitable property was found on Sharon Avenue, and it was purchased at slightly below appraised value for a cost of \$1.2 million. County ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds from the federal government were used to purchase the site.

In 2024 the County Board hired Abonmarch/Byce (AB), who are well regarded consultants that had worked on the Delta County and Marquette County jail projects. The pdf of their PowerPoint report is supplied. AB provided estimates for building a new jail/sheriff’s office at the Sharon Avenue site in 2025 for three different inmate capacities: 60, 70, and 80 inmates. The County Board in consultation with the sheriff chose the 70-bed option and put the plans before the voters in August 2025. The measure failed to pass by 44% in favor, 56% against.

HISTORY SUMMARY

2000	Courthouse addition 34 beds, 21 work camp beds No new support facilities	\$3.3 million	25% yes/ 75% no
2010	Dodge Street 110 beds, 21 work camp beds, New support facilities	\$15.0 million	26% yes/ 74% no
2018	55-bed Courthouse addition work camp in current jail no new support facilities	\$11.0 million	49% yes/ 51% no vote diff = 162
2025	Sharon Avenue property 70 beds, new support facilities	\$32.0 million	44% yes/ 56% no vote diff = 970

The County Board formed three committees in November 2025 to once again investigate the design issues raised by the voters that are preventing the County from building its much-needed jail and sheriff's office. The three committees studied: 1) funding sources other than a millage that could pay for the facility (the County-Held Properties Committee), 2) how the County could best use the existing building at Sharon Avenue and the old jail once emptied (The Sharon Avenue and Jail Re-Use Committee), and 3) the Jail Committee, which looked into all other design issues and external funding issues.

The three committees reported back to the Board in May 2025 with the following conclusions:

1. There are no county-held properties that are appropriate to sell that will net significant funds towards a new jail/sheriff's office.
2. The former church building on the Sharon Avenue property is best renovated for use for county administrative offices.
3. The current jail could in the short term be used for document storage once it is empty; further consideration of re-uses of that space should be considered.
4. Federal money of up to \$2 million may possibly be obtained through the "earmark" process; two proposals were submitted.
5. *The knowledge needed to design/spec out a less expensive jail /sheriff's office project is beyond the expertise of the volunteers on the Jail Committee. The committee recommended that the county reach out to local experts in contracting for this task.*
6. *A millage to support the difficult and unpopular idea of building a new jail must be written as a pledge to the voters that the funds will be the least reasonable amount of money, will not be used for anything other than the stated jail and sheriff's office, and the facility will be well built by those who know Houghton County well.*

To address items 5 and 6, the County is hosting this Industry Day.

The County Board hopes to be able to write a millage for the November 3rd ballot that meets the recommendations of item 6 above. The dollar amount that is selected to appear on the ballot must be sufficient to build the intended spaces and yet must be arrived at by working with trusted experts who can accurately design and cost the needed facility. Such experts are invited to Industry Day to join in this cooperative effort to bring to the county the safe, effective facility that it needs, at a cost that the voters can support.

Design Build versus Design-Bid-Build

As was reported in the local media, local contractor Moyle Contracting approached the County Board and attested to the efficiency of the Design-Build process for infrastructure builds such as the proposed jail/sheriff's offices. The Board and the Jail Committee received this input with an open mind but there are many questions and concerns about this process. Contractors who wish to pursue this pathway are invited to lead discussions of their ideas during Industry Day.

Size of the Jail

The Michigan Department of Corrections has standards that, by law, must be followed when building a jail/sheriff's office. In the AB report they listed the current square footages of the various departments in the jail and compared the current sizes to the MDOC square footages for a 51-bed jail.

Why the 51-bed number? The current average daily population of the jail is 28, which is the capacity of the current jail. Thus the jail is often full. The way the Houghton County Jail currently operates is that it holds steady at 28 beds by releasing inmates. Law enforcement officers arrest individuals who appear to have broken the law and these individuals are housed in the jail if that is appropriate and if there is appropriate space for them. If there is not appropriate space for an individual who should be detained in the jail, the prosecutor's office and the judges must determine who from among the jail population should be released to make room for the new detainee. This process takes place continuously when the jail is full, presenting a danger to the public in the form of released inmates who should be detained. When there is no space, there is no space.

What does this have to do with 51 beds? The AB report calculates that for there to be enough available spaces for the different kinds of detainees that come along with a 28-person average daily jail population, the jail needs to have 51 beds. What combination of what sorts of detainees (men, women, sex offenders, felons, juveniles, etc.) might present to the jail at any one time is called the classification problem. Considering classification, a 28 person ADP (average daily population) is managed by a 51-bed jail.

Note in the discussion above that we said the ADP was 28. It's actually an artificial 28 since it is being held at that number by the releases that are being made when the jail is full. It would be unwise to build only to this number. The estimates made by AB in their study indicated that 60 beds would be suitable and 70 or even 80 beds could be reasonably built to accommodate future jail population numbers. The chosen number is a judgement call, but AB recommends no fewer than 60 beds in a new jail housing unit.