

To: North Dakota Legislators

Re: Assistance for county jails

January 22, 2025

I know you are considering several bills regarding helping counties deal with the shortage of jail space. I thank you for that and encourage you to find a path to making it happen.

Our current jail was designed in the early 1970's and with the changes in requirements and increase in criminal activity it has become difficult and costly to maintain and operate an outdated facility that is full nearly every day. (Hotel and apartment owners would be envious of our occupancy rate!) This is why Richland County began researching a new jail in 2024. We are working with Elevatus, a respected firm that has built numerous facilities, including one in Rochester Indiana. We recently toured the Rochester facility, which is relevant as Fulton County Indiana bears a striking resemblance to Richland County in population and demographics, with a population difference of only 3,000. Fulton County, like Richland, had an outdated 32-bed jail and they recently replaced it with a 210-bed facility. It may sound big, but it has worked out well for them as it provides for future growth while creating a safer environment for both staff and inmates, with minimal increases in staffing costs due to efficiencies in the new system. It saddens me to say we must plan for future growth in our prisons, but it's a reality. Crime is not decreasing.

Our estimates indicate a price tag for a 210-bed facility at \$58-60 million, plus land and other costs, so we're estimating a total cost near \$70 million. The proposal includes a section to deal with those in mental health crisis who do not belong in the jail portion. As you know, mental health is a major issue for our communities, and our law enforcement staff typically ends up dealing with these individuals.

Richland County takes a very conservative approach to our budget, lowering mills to compensate for the increase in valuations. We hold every department responsible for keeping costs in line or reducing them. We currently levy a total of 92.5 county mills for a total of \$10,112,650. Constructing a new facility on our own would be very challenging. We need help! Any excess county mills to build a new facility would be taken to a public vote as it will be a very large request of our residents. I feel most people recognize this is a very serious issue, and at some point, something must be done.

This is a Public Safety issue!

You will be hearing from our Chief Jailer Steve Gjerdevig who will discuss our situation further and answer any of your questions.

Again, I thank you for considering any legislation that would help solve this issue and for your service to the people of North Dakota.

Perry Miller
Richland County Commissioner