

Testimony
To the
House Political Subdivisions Committee
On
HB 1213

Chairman Longmuir and House Political Subdivisions Committee Members, my name is Steve Gjerdevig, and I am the Jail Administrator for Richland County. Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today about the urgent matter of jail overcrowding in our community and across the state.

Our current jail, which opened in 1975, is outdated and severely overcrowded. Meeting the North Dakota Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation standards every year becomes more challenging, given that today's requirements are far different from when our facility was built. We serve as a regional jail, housing individuals not only for Richland County but also the Wahpeton Police Department, the U.S. Marshals Service, Sargent County, Ransom County, Dickey County, Tribal authorities from Sisseton, South Dakota, and anyone arrested on a felony warrant nationwide. In 2024 alone, we processed and housed over 500 inmates. Some remained only a few hours until they posted bond, while others stayed several days. Sometimes, it feels like we are playing a game of Tetris, trying to find space for everyone.

This constant lack of space has forced us to turn away arrestees—even those with felony warrants—because we simply cannot hold them. Turning away potentially dangerous individuals is a serious public safety concern. It is distressing to deny our law enforcement partners access to the jail when they are acting to protect our communities. Many nights, I have had to send out emergency notifications informing local agencies that we cannot accept new inmates. This situation has become the norm, which is concerning not just for Richland County but for the broader region relying on our facility.

Richland County Commissioners have been exploring a solution to this crisis by working with Elevatus to discuss the construction of a modern 200-bed facility. However, a project of this scale is well beyond the financial capacity of our county alone, and we urgently need the state's assistance. If we fail to act, we risk continuing to release or turn away individuals who should be in custody, further endangering the public. I support House Bill 1213 because it would help provide a vital funding mechanism to make this new facility a reality. A modern, properly sized jail will ensure that those who break the law are appropriately detained, creating a safer community for everyone.

I can provide photographs of our current facility to show the extent of its deterioration and the overcrowded conditions we face daily. I hope that these images, combined with our testimony, will convey just how urgent the situation has become. Our citizens deserve the assurance that law enforcement can do its job without being hindered by inadequate infrastructure.

Thank you for your time and for considering legislation that addresses this critical need. The safety and well-being of our communities depend on ensuring that jails meet current standards and can house offenders who pose a threat. I respectfully ask for your support of HB 1213, and I am happy to answer any questions you may have.