

Dear Editor,

Recently there have been a lot of statements made about the County's jail proposal that I feel only tell part of the story. The County has been studying future inmate housing needs since 2012. Over this period the County has invested in numerous efforts to address our rising inmate population including adding beds to the existing facility, utilizing treatment courts, the Prosecutor's diversion program and increased pre-trial release services. Even with all these efforts our jail is full and very frequently over capacity, inmates are sleeping on the floor, and we are paying to have inmates housed in other counties. We currently have inmates in three other counties and have been told they cannot accept additional inmates. We are now talking with jails in Joplin and Springfield.

Not only is our jail overcrowded, but it is also twenty 26 years old and rapidly deteriorating. Inmates are finding ways to break off and make weapons out of the rusted metal pieces of the vents, shower doors, bunks and other items making it an unsafe for the other inmates but also making it a dangerous working environment for jail staff.

Several people focused on parts of the statements made the County's jail consultant. The consultant estimates a need for 464 beds in 30 years. The number of beds proposed in the County's plan is only 7 beds larger than the consultant's estimated need. I have seen and heard statements from people about the proposed tax who were not part of the meetings where different scenarios were discussed. The County investigated different tax rates and different lengths. While no one can predict all the economic variables that can occur over 20 years, the current proposal was the only one that didn't have major shortages. If there ends up being excess revenue, it can only be spent on the facility and its operations, and it may prevent the County from raising property taxes or having to come back to the voters at the end of the proposed tax. There have also been comments about housing for other counties. While there was a brief conversation with Clinton County to possibly get a lower interest rate based on a special program if a rural county was involved, there has been no commitments to house for other counties.

Even if approved, the County will still be dealing with this situation for possibly the next four to six years. It will take time for the new expansion to be built, move current inmates into it and then complete renovations of the old jail.

Respectfully,

Sheriff Mark S. Owen