

“DON'T BUILD A BIG NEW JAIL ”

Guest Column by John Hamilton, May 2026

Efforts to improve our local jail started on the wrong foot several years ago.

Facing an overcrowded downtown jail needing attention and subject to a consent decree, county officials hired outside prison “experts” who unsurprisingly said we need a huge new prison complex – one-story tall on six or eight city blocks worth of land, with double the current capacity. Price tag: \$300 million.

Our mistake was thinking we just needed to improve a jail. No, we also need to overhaul a criminal justice system.

The late Charlotte Zietlow and I penned a plea last October urging not to buy the big plot of land called North Park for a giant jail and instead improve local services. With scores of local people showing up and testifying against the purchase, the County Council unanimously agreed.

Now six months later, the County Commissioners are back pushing the old plan again.

The right foot, which is more important than ever now, is to invest substantially in new human services – housing, mental health and addiction services, job placement, counseling and the like – to reduce our incarceration levels and improve our overall criminal justice system.

The right foot is to state a reasonable goal – like by investing in better services now, reduce our jail population to X in Y years. Our jail count is already moving in the right direction, down from a high of about 300 several years ago to closer to 200 now.

The right foot is to take several steps now, to invest the \$20 million per year in new tax revenue already available to the County:

- Immediately appropriate any funds needed to fix pressing needs at our existing jail, while we address the longer term. Good people have made good progress improving the jail – likely providing constitutional care now with its lower population and better supervision – and anyone who thinks it is not constitutional surely ought to push to fix that without delay
- Immediately appropriate several million dollars to improve our human services – use the new revenues available now to start enhancing housing, counseling, job placement, treatment and more
- Convene a local group to evaluate options with a fresh eye: for example, we could plan for 150 jail residents in ten years, and fewer after that as we invest in diversion and decrease recidivism. Give them six months to work and produce recommendations.
- Make clear (to the public and the ACLU) that we are fully committed to both a constitutional local jail and to a better criminal justice system, and aggressively put our money where our mouth is

This is one approach that can work. There no doubt are others. What we absolutely should not do is lock up vast amounts of our precious public dollars for a giant new jail designed by the prison-industrial complex to lock up more of our neighbors. It would just perpetuate the terrible over-incarceration of the people of our community for decades more.

To those who may doubt we can accomplish this, I'd note:

- Our country reduced incarceration of juveniles by 75% in the past generation
- We have plenty of options for space in the city: consider adding four stories over the downtown Curry Building next to the current jail, with 40,000 square feet, new elevators, space for services and more (at much lower cost than the new planned jail). Or the old post office site. Or the current county health building site. Or Showers West. Or plenty of other options for scattered site housing
- We have available funding to get started: \$7-10 million a year for physical improvements of a jail and \$7-10 million a year for improved human services would be a game changer.

We started on the wrong foot. Let's step back and get it right. We absolutely should not build a huge new incredibly costly jail. We absolutely should build a new criminal justice system with humanity and care for our fellow residents.