

Yellowstone County



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May 30, 2023

Dear Mayor Cole & Billings City Council Members,

We are in receipt of your letter dated April 13, 2023 regarding your request that the County conduct a jail-needs assessment. While we appreciate the concerns you raised, and the need to address the challenges outlined in your letter, at this point, the County believes that a jail-needs assessment is premature as there are more feasible alternatives to address overcrowding at the detention center. To this point, the County still owes approximately seven million dollars for the most recent expansion of the detention center. Conducting an additional assessment and potential expansion of the detention center would create a significant burden that is financially unfeasible for the County and taxpayers. Instead, we must prioritize the responsible management of our financial resources and explore more cost-effective solutions before considering any future expansion plans.

Currently, there are several inefficiencies that are contributing to the issues with overcrowding. Perhaps most significant is the delay in moving trials along, creating extended periods of detention. Likewise, delays and lack of movement on federal inmates and those subject to the Department of Corrections has led to detention center beds being occupied by inmates who should be housed in separate facilities. Addressing these issues presents a cost-effective method of freeing up space at the detention center and negating the need for a more costly expansion. Likewise, the actions that the City is taking in evaluating its misdemeanor prosecution and municipal court operations will hopefully be effective in identifying additional areas for improvement.

Staffing the detention center has additionally become a significant challenge. The detention center is currently seventeen officers down, and the shortage of qualified personnel in our area has made it difficult to adequately staff the current facility. Adding additional space to the detention center would only exacerbate this problem as it would require an even larger workforce to ensure the safety and security of the inmates and staff.

While we understand the importance of addressing the concerns associated with the detention center, we believe that focusing on alternative solutions that address inefficiencies, reducing overall incarceration timelines, and streamline inmate transfers would be a more prudent approach at this time. We are committed to exploring these alternatives and are open to discussing further strategies that can improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the facility.

We value the collaborative relationship that we have with the City and remain dedicated to working together to find solutions that prioritize the best interests of our community and ensure the efficient operation of our correctional system.

Sincerely,

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
YELLOWSTONE COUNTY, MONTANA

John Ostlund, Chair

Mark Morse, Member

Donald W. Jones, Member