

## THE GREENE COUNTY COXSACKIE JAIL PLAN DISASTER

TO: THE EDITOR

FR: BOB JANISZEWSKI, TANNERSVILLE, NY

RE: COMMENTS IN REBUTTAL TO ARGUMENTS OPPOSING A JOINT-FACILITY GREENE/COLUMBIA JAIL

DT: 3/30/2018

During the months of debate at the Greene County Legislature regarding jail options to replace the current facility in Catskill, the choices presented are two: 1. Build an expensive new facility located in Coxsackie costing approximately \$55,000,000; and, 2. A low-cost alternative - to operate a joint-correctional facility with Columbia County with an estimated capital cost of approximately \$7,500,000 for each county. As you know, the state of NY has been encouraging local government entities to cooperate, combine, and share services to save local property tax dollars where possible. For the most part, this voluntary "shared-services" approach has been successfully implemented in a number of localities – town with town, village with other villages, hamlets-towns-villages together – generally, sharing services between small municipal governments. These municipal shared services have indeed saved tax dollars. The notion of a shared-services agreement between counties has not been widely explored but there have been any number of cooperative, cost-sharing and tax saving projects implemented in the past. One obvious example is the community college that Greene County shares with Columbia County. Another might be the Hudson Valley Community College that is shared with several counties. But so far, no one has attempted a shared-services arrangement for correctional purposes. Such an undertaking between Greene and Columbia Counties would be a NY State first and would likely be the largest single tax-dollar saving project in state history. Not surprisingly, counties as regional governmental forms have a long history of regional service sharing. In fact, the current county-based jail system was the successor to the far more costly practice dating back to the colonial period of individual town and village jails complete with guards, command staff and a "warden."

Any substantial undertaking will, of course, raise questions as to cost and benefit as well as a long list of who wins and who loses. Some of these issues go well beyond the economies of scale or projected savings in institutional operating funds that may result and are the usual focus of discussion. The following list represents several objections to the shared-services jail proposal and, by extension, opposition to the relatively modest outlay to fund Greene County's ½ share of a feasibility study that would form the basis of making such a decision. It should be noted here that a \$30,000 outlay offset by a \$25,000 state grant, is a small amount compared to the \$1.5 million spent on the jail project to date. Here is the list of concerns raised by others in support of the Coxsackie jail site and opposing the shared-service approach. I have included some initial responses to each issue raised:

1. **ECONOMIC BENEFIT:** There will be substantial economic benefit to Greene County residents and taxpayers related to a \$55,000,000+ construction project in Coxsackie.

Obviously, a substantial construction project results in construction jobs, material purchasing, and the spin-off spending of those working during the construction cycle. However, as a public project, a public bidding process is required and, absent a serious challenge to the qualification of the "low bid", the contract **MUST BE AWARDED REGARDLESS OF THE LOCATION OF THE COMPANY OR INDIVIDUAL**. Local preference does not trump the low bid in public contract law.

Given the size of this proposed project, you can bet that it will attract the attention of major construction outfits from throughout the region and, perhaps, well beyond. Whether for project management, electric, plumbing, carpentry, masonry, roofing, material supply – like steel, cement, framing material, brick, etc., companies and providers from throughout the region and more, will be submitting bids. Do you really think that the small construction home builder in Catskill or Prattsville or the local hardware store or plumbing shop in Durham will be able to compete with the pricing of a high-volume large business? In the construction industry, change orders are the rule, not the exception, and initial bid price is sure to rise – something that the county will have little control over, as Ulster County discovered just a few years ago.

I submit that it is more likely that out-of-county bidders will prevail. Maybe we can count on increased sales from the food trucks that will likely be on site or that these corporations might hire some local labor. But, you can bet that the successful bidder construction companies, plumbing firms, and electrical companies will complete the job with the highest take-home profit that they can – and take it all out of county.

2. **REVENUE LOSS:** Greene County taxpayers will spend more in tax dollars to Columbia County for correctional services instead of Greene County charging other jurisdictions to hold their overflow inmates in our oversized new jail.

This notion – that we would “lose revenue” because we COULD be charging other jurisdictions to house THEIR prisoners just doesn’t make sense. First, Albany County, Columbia County, Schoharie County and others all have excess jail space. And, it is likely that the numbers will shrink further, not increase. The reason for this is fourfold: 1. the long-term trend in inmate population is downward and has been decreasing for a decade and more; 2. recent efforts to reform the bail system will more likely lead to yet another decrease in jail headcount; 3. Should the current drug laws be eased, the same impact will be seen. Therefore, there is no reasonable expectation that jail population will grow, leaving any overbuild that we may plan for simply vacant; 4. Greene County would no longer be simply a “tenant” paying rent to Columbia County. The proposed shared-services facility would be jointly administered by both counties through a Memorandum of Understanding, negotiated and adopted by both County Legislatures. Estimated savings in the millions of dollars in annual outlay would be enjoyed by BOTH counties. Any real “loss” would be in the increased spending resulting from inmate transfer and travel to Court appearances in Catskill – a distance further from Coxsackie than from Hudson.

3. **SALES TAX LOSS:** Greene County residents who work at the new facility in Columbia County will shop there and, as a result, Greene County will lose sales tax dollars.

The Columbia County jail is located in Hudson. Does anyone really believe that Greene County residents working at that site will shop their groceries, their laundry, their dry cleaning, etc., in Hudson? The box stores located there are in the opposite direction from home for Greene residents and, in fact, an employee could be home before they did the round trip to the northeast side of Hudson where the big box stores are located. Even the antiques on Warren

Street are not the daily “shopping” targets that are likely for our correctional staff. Given the tax impact of a \$55,000,000+ outlay for the project and an increase in county debt and debt service from \$13.3 million to nearly \$70 million (not counting interest) in the county budget, any imagined sales tax loss is microscopic by comparison.

4. SHERIFF’S OFFICE EMPLOYEE LOSS: Sheriffs and other jail employees will lose their jobs.

Presently, the Sheriff’s Office operates several divisions including the jail, road patrol, marine patrol in the Hudson, the Civil Office serving the courts, Court House/County Building security, security at the Mental Health Center in Cairo, tracking sex offenders in the community, and criminal investigations. Would it surprise you to discover that there are only 3 fulltime officers in CRIMINAL INVESTIGATION?

The Correctional Officer segment located at the county jail in Catskill numbers just 31 – a number that has remained low over time. I would think that a prudent and effective shared-services plan could be to re-assign some of our trained Correctional Officers to the new shared Hudson site to oversee our detainees located there. Other officers could join the Road Patrol division to keep our roads safe, and still others could be transferred to the Criminal Investigations unit to better chase perpetrators and solve crime. In fact, all of this might be funded without a tax consequence due to the money saved through the shared facility and the state grant dollars that would be generated by the project.

Further, recent events in Parkland Florida and the resulting marches across America demanding better school safety have increased calls for “hardening” of our schools by President Trump and legions of others. This generally includes the placement of “Resource Officers” in our schools. With limited local town, village, and hamlet property tax resources, such an effort would seem an appropriate service that might be offered by the Sheriff’s Office to complement local effort and save local tax dollars.

IN SUMMARY

The concerns listed above pale in comparison to the pain that would result from the proposed \$55 million Coxsackie jail as proposed. That amount of increased debt for Greene County – going from the county’s current capital debt at \$13.3 million to nearly \$70 million, not counting interest, will stay with us for decades and be a continuing burden that will likely drain tax resources from other potential beneficial projects or programs that would improve the quality of life in our communities, rather than saddle us with an expensive and unnecessary jail.

This sentiment was confirmed by an informal conversation with some young couples who moved to the Mountaintop because they could afford to start their lives here. With moderate home costs and reasonable taxes, it was possible to see themselves as raising their children in the clean country air, with good schools, and away from the dangers and temptations of the big city. The goal that they shared was wanting to build a life in the beauty of the Catskills with government engaged in assistance for economic development along with providing services that

enhance their country life experiences for themselves and for the family that they plan to build here. The thought that their future would be held for ransom by a huge debt incurred to build a facility that does nothing at all to promote the quality of life in the place that they chose to build their lives, especially since there is a low-cost alternative available, is a serious disappointment. Greene County government can be smarter..... and can be better than that.