

# There's no easy fix for Wayne County jail mess

It's time, again, for some straight talk about our jail mess.

The existing Wayne County jails are in need of significant repair, if not outright replacement, even though a new jail stands partially built at Gratiot and Beaubien in Detroit. The previous county administration first started, then stopped work on the project after an audit showed it was expected to run \$100 million over budget.

Unfortunately, the solution to this mess is not as easy as some have suggested. Wayne County pays about \$17 million a year for a partially built jail that we can't use. Unfortunately, selling the Gratiot site does not relieve the county of this obligation. This yearly cost will be an obligation of the county until the bonds sold to finance what has been built so far are paid off.

The other reality is that Wayne County needs a new jail. As Wayne County Circuit Judge Timothy Kenny [made clear last month](#), our aging jails are falling apart. We understand that we need to do required maintenance to those facilities as soon as possible. And we will. Prisoners deserve adequate conditions, but under any scenario, the existing jails have to be used for years. Even with maintenance, eking out another five or 10 years of life from those aging facilities will be a struggle.

There is little doubt that the cost-effective, long-range solution is to build a new jail. A new jail will allow consolidation of three separate jail buildings into one, resulting in significant operational and maintenance savings — savings that will eventually be more significant than the cost of building a new jail.

The dire state of our county's present finances, however, does not now allow us to do what is in our long-term interest. When your house is burning, it's not the time to develop your plans for rebuilding. You must first put out the fire and assess the damage.

I am devoting almost all of my efforts to improving the county's finances. And I'm hopeful that in the not-too-distant future, the county's finances will improve to the point where we can again do long-range planning that makes sense. While we work to improve the county's finances, I want to keep the most cost-effective solution to the jail mess open.

The most cost-effective solution might be to finish the partially built jail along Gratiot. We have already spent about \$150 million building what we have. Whatever the cost to finish that site, it is likely to be at least \$100 million cheaper than starting from scratch at a new site. And the only real

offer the county has had for that site is \$20 million. Consequently, It just doesn't make sense to me to grab a little bit of money now for a site that might save us a lot more in the near future.

I ran for this job with the promise of transparency in county government. And this is the reality of our jail mess today.

Warren Evans is the Wayne County executive.