

**Initial Statement by Supervisor Griffith on 12-16-2025 during discussion of a resolution to designate the Scott Road site as the future site of the new jail and possible "justice center."**

I want to start by saying that I expect to vote against this resolution. Not because I am opposed to building some version of a new jail -- I believe we have to do that. I'm voting against it for four other reasons.

The first reason is that this resolution puts the cart before the horse, committing us to the Scott Road site for the jail before we know what the scope of our project or its cost will be. I want to know the cost first and then decide if moving out there is our best option financially.

Second, I am against wasting time and taxpayer money to develop plans for a whole Justice Center -- which is what this resolution proposes -- when the Executive says he'll veto moving the other justice-related facilities out of the downtown. Why should we pay for a study of a project we're not going to do?

The third reason is that if Executive Kaufman is going to veto moving the courts and other offices out of our downtown building, then moving the jail only means we would have separate facilities for the foreseeable future. This involves enormous cost and hassle for our Sheriff's Office, with Sheriff Waldschmidt estimating 3,000 prisoner transports a year for court appointments. It also involves inconvenience for others, including our DA's office, Juvenile Justice, etc. It makes no sense to me that we would do an RFP for a schematic plan for this project when the full Justice Center will be vetoed and the jail-only move is so problematic and will involve such high ongoing operating costs.

This resolution looks like the result of a three-legged sack race, committing us to studying a complex our executive will veto in a location we might not choose if it's only the jail we're going to get. I'm embarrassed that this is what a year-and-a-half-long process has brought us to.

The fourth reason I'm voting against this resolution is that our process for getting here has been woefully inadequate. I am going to list some ways I experienced this process failing.

We never invited meaningful public input, which is the proper way to shape and get support for a huge investment like this. Some concerned citizens and a former judge weighed in thoughtfully, but we never discussed their concerns or gave them a proper forum. I consulted on my own with a city planner who specializes in large infrastructure projects like stadiums, and she was shocked that we were not starting with public listening sessions.

As a member of the Ad Hoc Jail Committee, I raised questions early on about the factors affecting the size of our jail population -- a concern that was also expressed by others, including the former judge. We were told that what influenced the size of our jail population was outside our purview -- even though one of the most basic and consequential decisions we would have to make was how big a jail to build. Later I found a guide from the Department of Justice laying out best practices for sizing jails, and it raised up exactly the kinds of concerns we heard. Those of us calling for this were not crazy -- we were absolutely in line with professional recommendations.

As part of my series of articles on county affairs for the Ripon paper, I drafted an article about why we needed a new jail. It seemed like a good way to start the public conversation I assumed we would be having. I was told I could not write about the jail project or the work of the committee -- only the chair of the ad hoc committee was given permission to communicate with the public. I now regret that I allowed myself to be silenced this way.

At one meeting of the Ad Hoc Committee, I asked if we could put on the agenda a chance to talk about what we were hearing from our constituents -- a way to address some of the public's concerns even if we weren't going to have listening sessions. The Executive, the Sheriff and Corporation Counsel vigorously put the kibosh on that idea without suggesting any other way we could bring citizen voices into the discussion. How was I supposed to do the job I was elected to do if I couldn't bring my constituents' voices into the room, and if I couldn't share the deliberations of a public committee with my constituents?

I also repeatedly raised the possibility of inviting in experts to help us learn more. It didn't seem right that we were undertaking such a complex project without hearing from a wider range of perspectives than just an architectural firm.

For example, I suggested we try to learn about diversion programs that other counties were using to keep their jail populations down. Sawyer County has seven such programs and Winnebago County has eight. Now that we have shut down our Drug Court, Fond du Lac County has zero. I corresponded with the retired Sheriff of Dane County who had recently completed a jail project. He would have been glad to talk with us about what he learned.

When our committee heard about the challenges of medical care and behavioral health in our current jail, I sought out experts on these topics and corresponded with several of them. They were more than willing to join us for a conversation.

However, over and over, I could not get the Ad Hoc Committee as a whole interested in exploring any of these issues. Finally after many months the chair and vice chair of the committee gave me a green light -- and at the meeting where I was ready to formally present consultant names for consideration we were told the Ad Hoc Committee had completed its work and we would not be meeting again. In the end, the only experts we heard from were the Samuels Group architects.

After the ad hoc committee disbanded and the County Board viewed the Samuels Group presentation on the Justice Center, I asked how Supervisors could participate in the process going forward. We were told we could speak during the public comment period at the start of committee meetings, and we could communicate our thoughts to the chair of the joint committee. I reached out to the chair multiple times by phone and email and did not get a response. I wrote up my concerns and asked to speak during the public comment period at the start of a meeting, but I was denied and told my concern wasn't on the agenda. That was precisely the problem I was trying to address. I tried to give my written comments to the chair and he refused to take them. I called the County Board chair to let him know what was happening, but in the end, nothing changed. I attended every meeting of the joint committee, and I never got a substantive response nor did the joint committee ever address during its meetings the issues I and others raised.

And now, many months later, ever since someone -- I don't know who -- posted my November jail article on the KFIZ website, I have been getting calls and emails from county residents. Every single one has been opposed to moving forward with the Justice Center concept, to spending 300-400 million dollars, and/or to building at the Scott Road site -- at least with what we know now. I want to point out that the financial figure in my article is not an irresponsible invention, as has been suggested. The Samuels Group included the estimate of 392 million dollars for the Justice Center in its chart of options at the end of the Ad Hoc Committee process. It is certainly not a final number, but it is a professional, informed estimate that we paid good money for. I also want to say that the people who have contacted me about the cost and other issues related to the jail project have widely divergent ideas about law enforcement and corrections, but they are united in opposition to what looks to be coming down the track, and in their anger about the lack of transparency to date.

As a member of the Ad Hoc Committee and the County Board, I was in theory on the inside of this process, and0 frankly, I feel just as frustrated and excluded as a lot of constituents do.

I'd like to end by saying that I'm not here to argue against building a new jail, or for endlessly postponing a decision. But we have largely wasted the last 15 months if all we can come up with is a nonsensical two-headed beast of a resolution, a good chance of an executive veto, and an angry public. We can and must do much better than this. I am committed to doing all I can to be a hardworking, collaborative team player going forward. We have a tough job to do, some good people to do it, and our county is watching. I believe the path forward starts by defeating this resolution and rolling up our sleeves -- together -- to craft a better one.

I vote no.