



"It's critical that our jails are safe and secure, but it's also important that our jail environments can influence positive change and put inmates on a good path upon release. With this funding, we're helping these local jails move forward with projects that will allow them to better meet the demands of our modern criminal justice system and further support the growing number of inmates struggling with substance use and mental health issues."

Governor Mike DeWine, April 20, 2023

CCAO – BSSA Jail Project Survey Executive Summary

The County Commissioners Association of Ohio (CCAO) and the Buckeye State Sheriffs' Association (BSSA) have completed a jail project survey and thoroughly examined the construction costs associated with jail construction after many conversations with our members. We received responses from 65 counties, and the total estimated cost for proposed and pending jail projects totals \$2.2 billion dollars (\$2,208,418,946). Counties also were asked about the increase in cost from the initial bid to the current project estimate, and projects are coming in 41.5% higher than the initial bid on average. The exponential cost increase is leading many counties to the conclusion that they are unable to complete a jail project using solely local funds.

This response is concerning given the most common need associated with a new jail project was to increase the number of female jail beds, increasing the mental health and drug addiction treatment capacity in jails, and last but certainly not least, to enhance the safety for corrections officers. While considerable progress has been made on the jail construction front in the last couple of years, the growing construction costs are pricing counties out of potential projects.

The current inflationary environment has negatively impacted the ability for counties to construct jails. Counties currently are being quoted between \$800-\$1,100 per square foot for the total cost of jail construction projects. That rate is almost double the \$600 per square foot figure communicated in the 2019 survey. The exponential increase in construction costs will effectively price many counties out of jail construction unless they receive financial support from the state.

We are thankful the DeWine-Husted Administration and the last several general assemblies have reinvigorated the state county partnership concerning jail funding. Before this administration, the last state investment in county jails occurred more than 20 years ago. As a result of the lapse in funding, many county jails have become outdated and in need of reconstruction. Additionally, the population served in county jails has evolved into one which requires increased mental health and substance abuse treatment.

Additional funding is needed in the upcoming capital budget to continue to assist counties with their jail projects. Therefore, CCAO respectfully requests that the capital budget allocate \$250 million to county jail construction projects, a figure we believe is justified by this timely survey. Such appropriation will further the state county partnership in this area and result in increased public safety in our communities.

Survey Analysis

Through December 2023 and January 2024, the County Commissioners Association of Ohio (CCAO) and the Buckeye State Sheriffs Association (BSSA) fielded a survey to gather information from counties regarding ongoing or planned county or regional jail projects. The survey is intended to provide the two associations, as well as state-level policymakers, with information regarding the cost and nature of these vital public safety projects.

The survey is a follow-up to a 2019 survey conducted by the two associations. Since the initial survey, thanks to a strong partnership between counties and the state, millions of dollars have been provided through grants to help build and renovate county jails. However, in the intervening five years, inflationary pressures have caused construction costs to increase rapidly and mental health and drug addiction issues among inmates have placed additional logistical and infrastructural pressures on county facilities.

This survey is intended to set new baseline figures for reference during policy discussions regarding county jail funding at the state level.

Project Type

The survey received responses from 63 counties and two regional jails. Forty-eight of these entities (or 74%) report that they have a jail project either planned or currently ongoing. This includes 20 new jail construction projects and 37 renovations and/or expansions of existing facilities¹. The maps included at the end of this write-up show the counties and regional jails that provided responses, those that are currently building or planning to build a new jail, and those that are renovating or expanding an existing facility.

Project Cost

Of the 48 entities that have a project planned or ongoing, 43 provided the current projected cost of the project. Statewide, counties and regional jails are expecting to pay an aggregate of \$2.21 billion for their jail projects. Projects range from a \$160,000 renovation project for the Highland County jail to a \$758 million project to build a new jail facility in Cuyahoga County. The full list of projects and costs can be found in Table A on page 6.

Among the counties undergoing or planning renovation efforts, important security features are often the driving force behind renovations. Highland County and Pickaway County are both illustrative examples. Both counties explain that at least part of their renovation project will focus on cell doors and locks. Due to the age of their facilities (the Highland County Jail opened in 2001 and the Pickaway County Jail opened in 1992), both counties report intermittent

¹ Some counties have more than one project ongoing or planned, so the sum of the two project classifications is not equal to the number of entities that indicated they have a project ongoing or planned.

failures in their electrical lock system which threaten the safety of both inmates and corrections officers. Seneca County, which opened its jail in 1994, reports similar safety issues but, due to costs, is not pursuing a project at this time.

Since one of the main aims of the survey was to obtain some measure of the cost increases that counties and regional jails have faced since the initial 2019 survey, respondents were also asked to provide the initial quote they received for their project. Thirty-four respondents provided their initial quote; of these, 33 had also provided the current cost of their project. Among these 33 projects, the current aggregate cost is \$1.79 billion, compared to \$1.26 billion in initial quotes. That equates to a 41.5% cost increase between when counties and regional jails acquired quotes and when they began their jail projects. As a result, counties are beginning to look at smaller projects or decide to not begin a project due to the total cost being outside of their budget.

An example of this scenario came from Montgomery County, which received a quote of \$200 million in 2019 for a new jail facility. The cost at the time was too high and, with inflation and other increases, would be more costly today. Instead, the county has opted to pursue a smaller renovation project instead of a new facility.

The entity that provided a quote but does not have a project planned or ongoing, Marion County, indicated that the \$7 million quote was too great for their funding capacity, so they have not begun a project yet. However, it is likely the county will need to fund either a new facility or an expansion soon as they reported spending nearly \$900,000 in calendar year 2023 to house inmates in other county jails due to the limited capacity of their own facility.

Hocking County is another illustrative example of the cost pressures associated with building jail facilities. The county initially received a quote of \$24 million for a new facility project but the county descope its plans to make the project more affordable for the county and more competitive for potential state funding.

Bed Counts, Female Inmates, and Multi-County Capacity

One common concern raised by counties is the issue of overcrowding. As such, the aim of several projects is to expand capacity, be it through an entirely new facility or through renovating or expanding existing correctional facilities. Of the 65 entities that replied to the survey, 59 provided their current bed count and, where applicable, their post-project bed count. Currently, these entities can house 14,547 inmates and could hold, assuming their estimates of bed space after project completion don't change, 17,646 inmates after all projects are completed. This increase of 3,099 beds represents a 21% increase in housing capacity.

The Guernsey County Jail serves as a useful example of one less-discussed result of jail overcrowding. The facility is currently experiencing issues with its plumbing system, but is so overcrowded that its ability to fix the plumbing issue is hampered because there is no place to move inmates out of the affected areas for maintenance workers to be able to work. The inability to address issues while they are still minor or to perform preventative maintenance results in more expensive issues down the road and less safe environments for inmates and jail staff.

In tandem with the general overcrowding concern, county jails face pressures from increasing female inmate populations and populations struggling with drug addiction and/or mental health diagnoses. Addressing the needs of these two populations is a central component of several projects. For example, Auglaize County's expansion project is expected to add 30 beds to its jail's capacity; 21 of these beds are intended for female inmates and four are intended for male inmates who have mental health conditions. Similarly, the Lucas County jail project will increase the capacity by 90 beds when compared to the previous facility. The county plans to allocate at least 48 of these new beds to female inmates.

Pickaway County's project is a useful example of how even comparatively small projects can help increase housing capacity for these population groups. As mentioned in the prior section, Pickaway County's project is primarily a renovation project, with part of the focus on repairing the cell door lock system. The project itself is not expected to add any additional bed space, but with updated locks that are fully functional, the Pickaway County Jail will be able to house more female inmates since working jail doors will provide better security and increased separation for the female inmate population.

The projects in Hocking County, Holmes County, Muskingum County, Scioto County, Washington County, and Wood County are also all designed with the needs of the female population and mentally ill/drug addicted population in mind.

Respondents were asked if their facility currently has the capacity to or will have the capacity to hold inmates from multiple counties. The responses generally indicated that counties hold for other counties as space permits or on an emergency basis, and often on the terms of a contract or memorandum of understanding. Multiple respondents (Ashtabula County, Hancock County, Muskingum County, and Summit County) stated that they calibrated their projects to accommodate potential municipal inmates, as municipal felony offenders often end up housed in the county facility.

Other Thoughts

Respondents were given an opportunity to share any other details they thought would be helpful to CCAO and BSSA. One common theme counties discussed was the chronic unaffordability of meaningful jail projects. High costs mean counties either have to take a piecemeal approach and tackle only one or two issues at a time and let other issues build up or try to address them all at once in an expensive project which the county cannot afford on its own. A third approach, as alluded to earlier, is present in the Seneca County Jail, where the county has been deferring renovations due to high costs for so long that it now faces a failing HVAC system, failing cell door locks, failing intercom systems, faulty lighting, and failing plumbing.

These cascading system failures from years of deferred investment prove extra costly when considering the new needs of jail populations. The Wyandot County Jail was built in 1886. It faces all the difficulties of retrofitting a Reconstruction-era structure for modern life as one would expect, as well as a jail facility, expected to house individuals with mental health diagnoses and those with drug addictions. The county is aiming to construct a new jail building to address these shortcomings.

The Morgan County project is one worth highlighting, since it provides the perspective of a small county. The county is primarily served by the Southeastern Ohio Regional Jail located in Nelsonville (in neighboring Athens County). The regional jail is located about two hours round-trip from McConnellsville, the Morgan County seat. Morgan County's jail was closed in 2021 due to noncompliance with physical standards set by the Department of Rehabilitation and Corrections (DRC); as a result, essentially every arrestee in the county has to be transported to Nelsonville. This takes law enforcement officers out of the county at a time the Morgan County Sheriff's Office already has staffing difficulties. The county's project seeks to address noncompliance issues so it can reopen its own jail as a holding facility to help keep Morgan County law enforcement officers in the county.

On the other side of the spectrum, the Summit County project sheds some light on the obstacles faced by large counties, some of which are similar to those faced by small counties. The county's facility was built in 1990 and is experiencing several infrastructural problems (HVAC, plumbing, lighting, etc.). The county also is running out of space to house its inmates; it currently has a variance from DRC allowing it to double-bunk, yet that variance is under review. If DRC revokes the variance, the facility's capacity will be cut in half at a time when the county has more than 130 inmates awaiting trial on fatality-related offenses and when the county must house some inmates in neighboring Medina County. Like Morgan County, the Summit County Sheriff is understaffed and stretched thin. The new facility the would provide more space and alleviate many of the county's current issues.

While each county jail faces unique challenges, there are many similar underlying difficulties they all share. Continued state investment in this key component of a robust public safety system is vital and has shown success. For example, Coshocton County cited the grant funding from the state and the additional taxing authority for corrections facilities that counties received in the 133rd General Assembly's operating budget as the two enabling factors for its ongoing project to build a new jail facility. Gallia County also noted the state funding it received for its new jail project, which formally opened in 2023.

Supporting Documents

As a final piece of information, the survey provided respondents the opportunity to share any documents they believed would be useful to CCAO and BSSA. These include feasibility and needs studies counties have completed, overviews and detailed descriptions of projects, applications submitted unsuccessfully for prior rounds of jail grants, and more. Copies of these supporting documents are [accessible here](#).

Acknowledgements

CCAO and BSSA would like to thank Lucas County Commissioner Lisa Sobecki and Hancock County Sheriff Michael Heldman for helping to secure the responses received while the survey was open. We would also like to thank Governor Mike DeWine, Lt. Governor Jon Husted, Speaker of the House Jason Stephens, Senate President Matt Huffman, and the members of the General Assembly for their careful consideration of these vital county public safety funding needs.

Table 1: County Jail Project Costs, 2024 CCAO-BSSA Survey	
County/Jail	Current Project Cost
Ashtabula	\$43,730,000
Auglaize	\$6,300,000
Belmont	\$37,000,000
Brown	\$751,000
Corrections Center of NW Ohio	\$5,700,000
Clark	\$86,800,000
Clinton	\$3,271,000
Coshocton	\$43,000,000
Crawford	\$5,897,750
Cuyahoga	\$758,000,000
Delaware	\$16,000,000
Erie	\$627,895
Greene	\$75,000,000
Guernsey	\$4,675,528
Hamilton	\$7,800,000
Hancock	\$95,469,200
Hardin	\$15,000,000
Harrison	\$22,000,000
Highland	\$854,668
Hocking	\$14,000,000
Holmes	\$3,500,000
Lake	\$200,000,000
Lawrence	\$31,000,000
Licking	\$615,905
Lorain	\$100,000,000
Lucas	\$205,000,000
Medina	\$500,000
Miami	\$70,000,000
Montgomery	\$20,000,000
Morgan	\$350,000
Muskingum	\$60,000,000
Pickaway	\$3,600,000
Scioto	\$2,200,000
Southeast Ohio Regional Jail	\$2,600,000
Shelby	\$176,000
Stark	\$86,000,000
Summit	\$70,000,000
Tuscarawas	\$12,000,000
Washington	\$2,000,000
Wayne	\$42,000,000
Wood	\$40,000,000
Wyandot	\$15,000,000
Total	\$2,208,418,946

Counties that indicated they do not have a project ongoing are not listed on the table.

Responses to CCAO-BSSA Jail Survey



■ No Response
■ Response

New Jail Facility Projects, Ongoing or Planned



□ No Response

■ No Project

■ Project



