

## RESPONSE TO SOME OF THE CRITICIZISM BEING RECEIVED REGARDING THE BUILDING OF OUR JAIL/JUSTICE CENTER

The decision to build a new jail/justice center for Hamblen County has not been an easy task. One of the major topics of the commission for many years has been the overcrowded conditions at our jail and the need for a new one. We as commissioners recognize that it is our responsibility to make the final decision relating to the construction of a new jail/justice center and do not take that responsibility lightly. We also recognized at the onset that whatever decision we make as to the location and type of facility that we choose to build will not please all of the citizens of Hamblen County.

Since we have been accused by some of ignoring the wishes of our citizens, I want to remind them of the following factors that went into the process of making our decision:

- A previous commission delayed the process of constructing the jail so that some of our current debt could be retired. This would enable the commission to borrow 65 to 70 million dollars for the construction of the jail/justice center with little or no tax increase to our property owners.
- Of course we have a recommended .03 cent property tax increase in our budget for the 2020-2021 fiscal year in order to pay for the construction project at West High School.
- I also want to remind our citizens that the total cost of the jail/justice center is not 76 million dollars. Ten million of that 76 million is to be used to fund the construction project at West High School.
- Had the commission decided to build the jail in 2016 it would have taken a .08 cent property tax increase to fund a \$ 50,000,000 dollar project. I wonder how many complaints we would have gotten if we had decided to build the jail at that time. Unfortunately no estimates for staffing the jail were available at that time.
- A previous commission and our current commission began the task of collecting ideas that would assist us in making wise and prudent decisions that would save our tax payers money over several years.
- Several of our commissioners visited the following facilities:
  - Hawkins County
  - Carter County
  - Anderson County
  - Claiborne County
  - Coffey County
  - Monroe County
  - Mayor Britton and Chairman Jarvis visited a facility in Transylvania County N.C.
  - Sheriff Jarnigan, Capt. Laws, Rick Eldridge, and Mayor Britton visited a jail in Colorado in 2015 while attending the PONI program.

These visits were extremely helpful because the jail administrators gave us many important ideas as to what to do and not do. They also shared with us things that they wished they had done

As to the charge that we should build a facility like or similar to Coffey County, I remind you that Coffey County built their jail to meet the needs of Coffey County not Hamblen County. We as a commission are charged to build a jail to meet the needs of Hamblen County not Coffey County or any other county that we visited.

Sheriff Jarnigan and others have accused us of refusing to listen to his ideas. The county's task force for this project has always been open to all ideas presented to them including the Sheriff's ideas. Most of these meetings, for whatever reason, the Sheriff did not attend. Commissioners Haun, Cutshaw, and Doty offered our Sheriff two months to present his proposal to us again and he responded to do so would be a waste of his time. We are sorry that our Sheriff doesn't approve of our plan; however again we can't please everybody in this process. Unfortunately the Sheriff has been one of our biggest opponents while it was he who has wanted a new jail since he first took office. The State has given the commission the responsibility to build the jail and the responsibility to manage and operate that facility to the Sheriff.

As to the charge that we have not considered a one level facility, I again want to remind our citizens that for the most part all of the above jails that we visited were one level facilities designed for an average of 400 inmates much less than what are jail administrators were wanting. Furthermore the current Justice Center is a multi-level building including the two story annex. Before that I understand that the jail was a three level building.

Proposals were also sent out to architects for architectural services. Nine proposals were submitted which included excellent ideas and estimated costs based on construction costs at that time. Some of these proposals included the current site and others included locating the facility at a new site. Most of these proposals were also single level facilities. So to accuse us of not considering an alternative solution is not based on the facts.

In addition to the above visits we also looked at property located on Hwy 25E, Morris Blvd.; Martin Luther King Blvd.; Davis Street, the former Food City Property on Buffalo Trail; and the property adjacent to the current jail. After much deliberation the majority of the commissioners choose to build the new jail adjacent to its current location. Among the many pluses for that decision was the immediate availability of electrical, gas, and sewer services at this location and the fact that the neighbors were already accustomed to a jail in their neighborhood. Other factors included its proximity to the hospital and the Helen Ross McNabb Center. Cooperative agreements with these agencies are critical to meeting the medical and mental health needs of the inmates. True at the time of our decision we were hoping to use the Jail Annex and Workhouse facilities but unfortunately these did not meet TCI standards and regulations without major remodeling. However should we need to expand the new facility we can go in the direction of the old facility. The current location certainly dictated the size of the facility and its façade is designed to fit the décor of the area.

Also during this process we listened very carefully to the people involved in the operation and administration of our current jail. Their input has been critical in formulating the

current plans. We also listened to the needs of our judges and court administration staff and their ideas have been very valuable. We did have the option of remodeling the current justice center. When the Sheriff wanted us to build a new jail he presented pictures of structural damage to the current center and rumors that it was built on a dump site influenced us to choose to use tax payer funds to construct a new justice center which would take care of the increase work load in our courts and safety concerns with the inmates interacting with our citizens as they went to and from court. We felt that we would be better stewards of tax payer dollars by spending the five million plus dollars on a newer facility that would better serve the future needs of our county.

As to the concerns regarding the staffing of the new jail, CTAS and our architectural professionals have assured us that the staffing would change very little between a multi-level facility compared to a one level facility. We anticipate of being able to phase in our staffing needs over a brief period of time.

Based on all of this input the majority of your commissioners have decided to build a four story jail facility adjacent to the current site with a justice center adjacent to the new facility. The majority of this commission believes that this is the best and right decision that will serve the jail and court needs of this county for many years.

We are in the final stages of the planning process and look forward to receiving bids for this project in the very near future.

We respect the position of those who oppose our decision; however, we have made our decision and will not delay the process because some are not happy with the decision we have made. To do so could in the long run cost us more tax payer dollars. The window of opportunity in saving tax payer dollars is before us now and we cannot delay this project any longer. We believe we have a mandate from the majority of the citizens of this county to move forward and get this much needed project completed.

*Harold Shipley*  
*July 23, 2020*