

A How-to-Guide to Organizing for Alternatives to Jail Expansion in Your Community

Step One: Getting the Facts

One thing that tends to unite communities across the United States who are facing jail construction projects is the overwhelming sentiment that they are not receiving full information - on the need for the jail, on the impacts it will have on the community, or on the fiscal costs. Any effort to make smart decisions regarding jail expansion needs to start with some research to answer these questions – with the number one rule being not to believe what jail proponents claim without looking for the research to back it up. When you first learn of a proposed new jail, all the unanswered questions might seem overwhelming – but a good starting point at making sense of the impacts of the new jail are the following:

What is the evidence to support the need for a new jail? Frequently, even the justifications for new jail expansion are questionable when looking for the facts. Some jail proponents will offer overcrowding of current facilities, projections of future jail populations, or poor conditions to back the supposed need for a new jail. However, before trusting these claims, you need to do the research on the situation. If the jail is in fact overcrowded, what are the reasons? What is causing overcrowding? What is the breakdown of the population of the people in jail – pre-trial, parole violators, misdemeanor versus violent offenses, etc? Are there options that can reduce jail populations that haven't been tried? If the jail is not overcrowded but proponents are projecting future growth – what is their claim? Is crime going down in the community? Are arrest rates going up? If arrest rates are going up, what can account for this change? Jail populations are an extremely difficult thing to project, so any hard prediction should be looked at with a great deal of skepticism, particularly if it is based on nebulous claims such as “in the past they have increased, so we are projecting a future rise.” If proponents are claiming that the current jail is in poor condition, how was that determined? Has there been an assessment done of the cost of renovation? Do maintenance records and budgets indicate that they have been making repairs?

Where to find this information: The Sheriff's office should provide records of who is in the jail and daily snapshots, as well as arrest rates. If your jail has a Pre-Trial Services staffperson, they can often give information regarding what reforms could be implemented to reduce the population and what programs are underfunded. You can also ask the Sheriff's office for maintenance records and budgets, as well as their criteria for maintenance or replacement.

How much will the jail actually cost, including construction, debt service, and operating costs?

While proponents of the jail will give a projected price-tag, many communities find after the fact that the costs of the jail were far higher than initially expected. When calculating the actual costs, look for the cost of construction, *plus* the cost of debt service on the loan. This can add an additional millions to the price tag of the project. You also need to factor in the cost of operating the jail each year, as well as any additional costs that are associated with rebuilding local roads and infrastructure to accommodate the project. If your town is considering a private jail, a common myth is that it won't cost the local community – but private companies don't like to risk

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their own money to build prisons, and often ask the local government for tax breaks, free infrastructure, and construction costs.

Where to find this information: Office of the Budget, City or County Planners and Manager, public utility and service officials.

What are the environmental impacts of the jail on the local community?

There are numerous potential environmental hazards that are associated with the construction and maintenance of detention facilities, including wastewater treatment, hazardous waste and trash disposal, asbestos management, pesticide use, vehicle maintenance and power production. These hazards are equally associated with both prisons and jails, which do not differ in environmental impacts. Has your town completed an assessment of the environmental impact on the local community, which is usually mandated by law? Has it evaluated what the impact of the new jail will be on water supply, traffic patterns, visibility of the night sky? Are there any considerations to make that are specific to the proposed site – waterfront, other industry, proximity to agricultural or tourist destinations?

Where to find this information: City and county planners, the Environmental Impact Report

Step Two: Getting Information Out and Developing a Strategy

The hardest part of your job is getting accurate information on the project. Once you have some facts, all you have to do is make sure that it gets out to the rest of your community – by writing letters to the editor, making up fliers and fact sheets to disseminate, telling the media, and holding community meetings on the topic. Other communities that have been successful at stopping proposed jail expansions said that the most important thing that they did was get the facts – which made them reliable sources for information on the jail proposal.

Once you have answered some of the questions about the impacts of the new jail and begun to circulate this information, you should also be developing your strategy. *A strategy is your blueprint to meeting your goal – in this case, what is your plan to getting alternatives to jail expansion in your community?*

As you develop this blueprint, there are more key questions to ask.

What are the steps in the decision making process of building the jail?

In trying to have a voice in the decision of whether to build or expand a jail in your community, you have to determine who the decisionmakers are and what the timeline is on their decision. At each step of the decision, you can intervene and alter the outcome. Some questions to consider are: Who currently owns the land under consideration and what is the process in making it available for the new jail? What committees in the local government must approve the plan, and what other regulating bodies have a say? What is the timeline for the project? With this information, you can also develop a strategy to intervene. It might never be too late to have a say in a jail project, but the earlier you can start the more opportunities you have for success – so

figure out who you need to target if you want to stop the jail – and develop your strategy to do so.

Where to find this information: If your local government keeps online records of meetings, read through all the past discussions of the jail. You can also usually look online for the description of how your local government functions, who is on each committee, and a schedule of upcoming meetings.

Who are your allies and who are the jail proponents?

If you are concerned about the impact of a new jail in your community, chances are high that other residents and community groups are as well – and some of them might be the most unlikely of allies. Small business owners, environmentalists, educators, fiscal conservatives, and the faith community are just some examples of the people that in the past have come together against proposed jail expansions. You also want to find out who are the biggest proponents of the jail and what their investment is in the project. Some people who are pushing for the jail might think that it will be good for their communities but are working with poor information – such as community members who think that building a jail will decrease crime rates in town when that has never been demonstrated to be true, or construction unions that think it's the only way to get new jobs for the community. Other people might have a very personal investment in the construction of the jail – private jail companies, the correctional officers union, elected officials with ties to either one. You want to work closely with your allies to build support for alternatives, make sure people who are undecided have accurate information, and expose the underlying motives of people who say that the jail will be good for the community.

Where to find this information: To locate other community members concerned with the jail proposal, first you can look for people who have spoken out in public meetings or who have written letters to the editor, who are the most obvious sources of immediate support. After that, you can contact many allies by offering to send community organizations or groups information on the topic, or making presentations to other people in your town. If they share your concerns, and feel comfortable getting involved, they will contact you. Jail proponents might be the easier ones to locate – they are the ones speaking in favor of the project at public meetings – but do some additional research to find out more of their motivations. Campaign contributions are public records – so if any elected official is receiving funding from any of the companies that might stand to gain – construction, architects, private prison companies – you want to know.

Step Three: Have an alternative plan.

While it is possible to prevent a jail from being constructed just by highlighting the harmful consequences, you can also use this as a time to come together as a community to propose something different. There are alternative solutions for all the problems that produced the jail proposal, and you can use this moment as an opportunity to put those in place. If the local jail population is rising, come up with alternatives to reduce overcrowding – and make sure those alternatives and reforms are funded. If your community needs economic development, use the momentum to support development and jobs that are good for the community and sustainable for

the environment. New schools, roads, and community centers are all things that can be built with the same pot of capital funds that were designated for jail construction.

Where to find out more: Communities across the United States have been working to come up with alternative solutions, to both jail overcrowding and economic need. Just some examples of these alternative models and reforms are available on www.cajeproject.org, where you can start for both practical solutions and creative ideas.

This How-to-Guide to Organizing for Alternatives to Jail Expansion in Your Community is by no means a conclusive document on the topic, nor does it contain all the information you may want. However, hopefully this can get you started asking the right questions and figuring out your strategy, and there are many more resources out there to help you on your way.

If you haven't already, check out the fact sheets and resources available on www.cajeproject.org to get some more information and see what is happening around the country, or give us a call or email to ask for advice or some help.

Good Luck!