



## **NEWS RELEASE**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: June 30, 2023**

**CONTACT: Tom Barry  
Beltrami County Administrator  
701 Minnesota Ave. NW  
Bemidji MN 56601  
Office (218) 333-4109  
tom.barry@co.beltrami.mn.us**

### **County Open to New Jail Locations**

**BELTRAMI COUNTY, MN** – The Minnesota Department of Corrections (MN DOC) issued a notice to Beltrami County several years ago requiring that substantial investments be made to the current jail as a condition of continued operation of the facility. Committed to mitigating these deficiencies, Beltrami County staff and Commissioners have been working for several years studying and planning for a new County Jail.

As part of this process, the Board recently evaluated over 15 properties to site the new Jail using a criterion developed by the Design and Operations Committee. In late May, the County Board announced the preferred location for the new Jail at the northwest corner of Jefferson Ave SW and the US Highway 2/71 Bypass known as the Wiebolt site.

Since then, the County has been conducting due diligence on the property. This due diligence typically involves collecting information about the property's condition, conducting environmental, geotechnical, and archeological investigations, and evaluating overall site suitability. This site suitability evaluation also includes conducting due diligence within the neighborhood. "It is very important that we hear from the residents that will be most impacted by the location of the facility" stated County Administrator Tom Barry. "The information we collect from residents, good or bad, is just as important in evaluating the suitability of the property as the other studies are" stated Barry.

Negotiations for the proposed site were kept behind closed doors as allowed by state law to minimize interference in negotiations, bargaining position and negotiating strategy of the County. "That can be hard for some in the public to understand," said Barry. "But it's a common, allowed

practice that is done to avoid undue influence, pricing pressure, undermining, sabotaging or other adverse actions to the buyer or the seller during the negotiation,” said Barry. Once the property was selected and approved, it was immediately announced to the public, another requirement of State law.

“We understand that wherever the County chose to locate the new Jail, surrounding neighbors would likely not enthusiastically embrace it” said Sheriff Jason Riggs. “But the project must move forward or the County risks having the Department of Corrections close the Jail, and that would be extremely disruptive and expensive for the County” Riggs said. If the County’s Jail Project does not move forward in a timely manner, out-of-county housing costs will continue to escalate exorbitantly. Worse yet, the MN DOC could sunset the Jail, forcing all inmates to be housed at other facilities – a cost that would impoverish the County.

The County was set to submit a conditional use permit and rezone request to the Greater Bemidji Area Joint Planning Board (JPB) for the Wiebolt property, but anticipating that action, the JPB sent a preemptive legal memo to the County stating that the County Jail would not be permitted in any zone under the current zoning ordinance. This opinion contrasts with State law which specifically directs counties to locate county Jails in the county seat.

Given this recent development and the information gathered at the public hearing, the County Board has directed the County Administrator to delay the submission of the County’s conditional use permit and rezone request. The Board also authorized the Administrator to continue investigating other locations. “The County Board has not abandoned the Wiebolt site, but recent developments have afforded the County an opportunity to investigate other potential properties that have since come to our attention or may have changed in status.” Barry continued, “While a project of this scale and type can be, and typically is, very controversial, the County acknowledges that it is important to listen to citizens and modify, when possible, our approach to ensure we are good stewards of our community. To that end, I know the Board has heard the concerns of the public and will ensure that we deliver the best project possible for our community.”

###