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Survey of Issues Involving County Jail Millage

Conducted for:

**Otsego County
April/May 2007**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY and DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

May 2007

- Educational
- Political
- Industrial
- Consumer

- Market
- Research
- Analysis

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METHODOLOGY

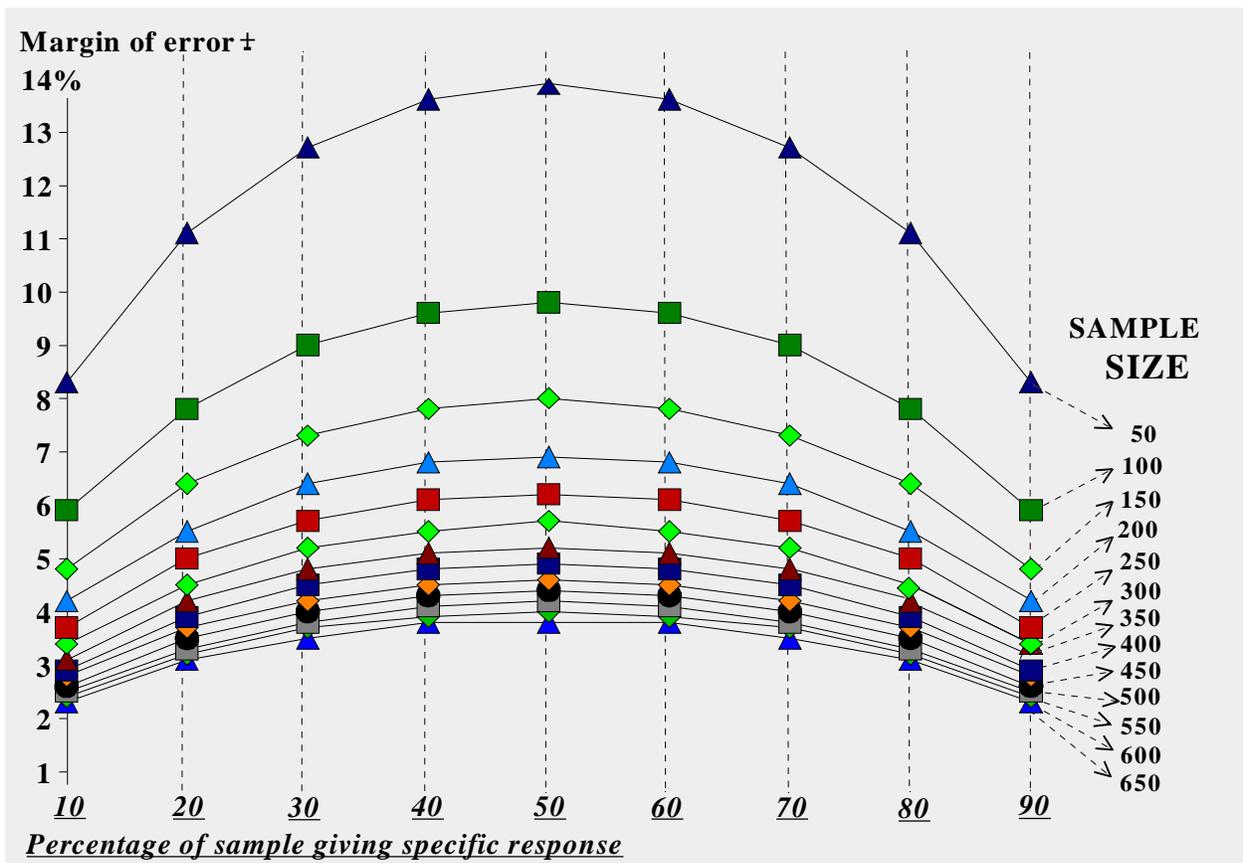
EPIC ▪ **MRA** administered interviews with 300 registered voters residing in Otsego County, Michigan, May 3 – 9, 2007. Respondents for the interviews were selected utilizing an interval method of randomly selecting records of published residential telephone numbers of registered voter households. The sample was stratified so that every area of the district is represented in the sample according to its contribution to a general election.

In interpreting survey results, all surveys are subject to error; that is, the results of the survey may differ from those that would have been obtained if the entire populations were interviewed. The size of the sampling error depends on the total number of respondents in the particular question. The table below represents the estimated sampling error for different percentage distributions of responses based on sample size.

For example, 47 percent of all 300 respondents gave a positive rating of either “*Excellent*” or “*Pretty good*” to describe how well Otsego County does in managing its finances (Question #8). As indicated in the chart below, this percentage would have a sampling error of plus or minus 5.7 percent. That means that with repeated sampling, it is very likely (95 times out of every 100), that the percentage for the entire population would fall between 41.3 percent and 52.7 percent, hence 47 percent ± 5.7 percent.

EPIC ▪ MRA SAMPLING ERROR BY PERCENTAGE (AT 95 IN 100 CONFIDENCE LEVEL)
Percentage of sample giving specific response

SAMPLE SIZE	<u>10</u>	<u>20</u>	<u>30</u>	<u>40</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>60</u>	<u>70</u>	<u>80</u>	<u>90</u>
650	2.3	3.1	3.5	3.8	3.8	3.8	3.5	3.1	2.3
600	2.4	3.2	3.7	3.9	4	3.9	3.7	3.2	2.4
550	2.5	3.3	3.8	4.1	4.2	4.1	3.8	3.3	2.5
500	2.6	3.5	4	4.3	4.4	4.3	4	3.5	2.6
450	2.8	3.7	4.2	4.5	4.6	4.5	4.2	3.7	2.8
400	2.9	3.9	4.5	4.8	4.9	4.8	4.5	3.9	2.9
350	3.1	4.2	4.8	5.1	5.2	5.1	4.8	4.2	3.1
300	3.4	4.5	5.2	5.5	5.7	5.5	5.2	4.5	3.4
250	3.7	5	5.7	6.1	6.2	6.1	5.7	5	3.7
200	4.2	5.5	6.4	6.8	6.9	6.8	6.4	5.5	4.2
150	4.8	6.4	7.3	7.8	8	7.8	7.3	6.4	4.8
100	5.9	7.8	9	9.6	9.8	9.6	9	7.8	5.9
50	8.3	11.1	12.7	13.6	13.9	13.6	12.7	11.1	8.3



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

EPIC ▪ MRA was commissioned by the Otsego County government to conduct a survey of public opinion among qualified county residents about issues involving the county jail. The primary focus of the inquiry was to glean information about a recently failed millage proposal to build a new county jail, and to measure opinion on a possible future ballot proposal to address the chronic overcrowding of the existing facility. The survey is the outgrowth of public discourse about the various options that have been weighed in the recent past involving the issue.

-- Questionnaire Frame

In order to accurately assess public opinion regarding the main issue, it was first necessary to gauge attitudes toward government services in general and to determine what respondents believe is the biggest problem facing their local government. In addition, other questions went to perceptions about the general direction in which the county is headed, assessment of how the county government does in delivering services, impression of the tax burden relative to services received, and perceived deficiencies in service offerings or delivery.

The survey next reminded respondents of the particulars of the August, 2006, election, when a jail millage proposal was among the issues placed before the voters. The respondents were asked if they had voted in that election, how they voted on the jail proposal and the reasons for why they voted the way they did. The survey next presented a hypothetical ballot question replicating the August 2006 details, and asked for an “up-or-down” vote “today” on the issue; respondents were informed of the total estimated cost of the project, together with an estimated annual tax increase on a home of an average value in the county.

In the next section of the survey, a series of arguments both for and against the proposition were read to the respondents, who were asked to rate the “convincingness” of each of the assertions. To eliminate the possibility of bias because of order of presentation, a split sample format was employed. That is, half of the 300 respondents heard a series of supporting arguments first, followed by a series of opposing arguments. The other half of the sample had this order of presentation reversed. After each set of arguments, respondents were again asked to register either their support or opposition to the hypothetical proposal that failed in the prior year, in light of the arguments that they had just heard.

Once the separate measurements of support or opposition were taken after respondents rated the respective advocacy arguments, those who said that they would vote “No” or were “Undecided” in the final “vote ‘today’” test were then read a statement outlining a scaled-back jail construction proposal, one seeking a lower amount of property tax revenue than the one the voter/respondents had just rejected. These respondents were then asked if they supported or opposed this scaled-back version. Among those who still voiced opposition to the scaled-back version, another proposal was presented, which sought yet less revenue for renovation and expansion of the current facility; these respondents were again asked to register their support or opposition to this minimized option.

By presenting successive options of decreasing cost to those who opposed the immediately preceding option, it is possible to determine the extent to which support for a proposal might be bolstered by scaling back the scope of the assessment sought.

-- Overarching Conclusion

There is very little support for a millage to fund new jail construction that would more than triple the current jail bed capacity. A high degree of concern about the current state of the local economy and its future prospects heavily influence how voters react to proposals to increase property taxes for the purpose of funding more jail space. This anxiety colors other important attitudes as well, including the perception of how well the county handles its finances, the characterization of how burdensome existing taxes are and even the acknowledgement of the existence of a well-publicized and chronic jail over crowding situation.

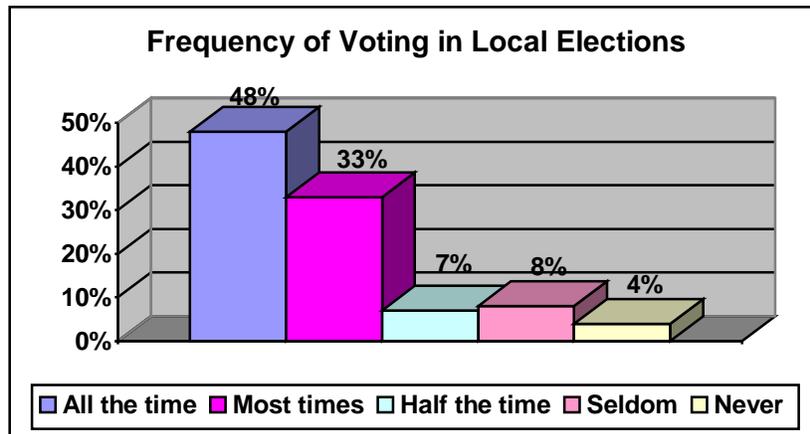
This is not to say that Otsego County voters would not support a more modest proposal to remedy jail overcrowding than was presented in August, 2006, for a new 120-bed facility. Indeed, a back-up proposal – to expand the existing jail to double the number of beds – was supported by a majority of the respondents taking the survey. However, this majority support is “soft” and was garnered only after repeated “vote ‘today’” tests of more expensive and expansive proposals, conducted after a robust battery of competing advocacy arguments had been presented – all to an audience that was “captive” in the interview proves for at least twelve minutes. Add to this the fact that a strong majority of residents do not see crime as being a particularly serious problem, and it becomes all the more difficult to persuade voters that jail over crowding has such serious everyday consequences that they must voluntarily and proactively increase their taxes.

If proponents of increasing the jail capacity decide to mount another ballot effort, they must be prepared for prolonged and tenacious education activity, highlighting the most persuasive arguments and addressing the natural reluctance of the residents to add greater household dollar outlay in the midst of very uncertain economic times. Otsego County voters know there is a jail over crowding problem and they know a facility built forty years ago is probably inadequate for today’s population. The difficulty facing proponents of increasing jail capacity lies in making these problems and deficiencies of great enough urgency to overcome the very real economic worries of the voters.

SPECIFIC FINDINGS

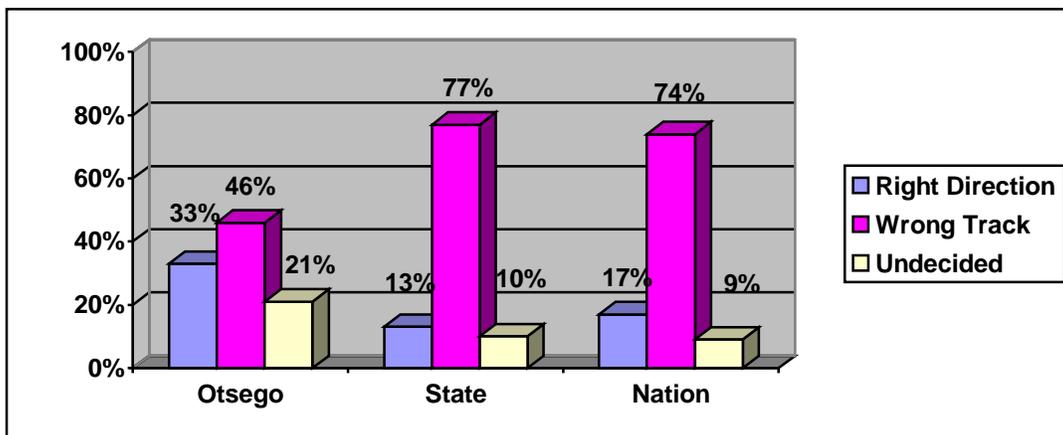
-- Frequency of voting

The sampling and initial screen of the questionnaire ensured that only qualified registered voters in Otsego County were interviewed; it is also useful to determine the frequency with which respondents report participating in less visible primary elections. Upon establishing the residency and registered voter status of the respondents, and after ensuring the respondent had voted at least in one of the last two November general elections, the interviewer told the respondent that turnout is usually much lower in local and special elections than in higher profile federal or statewide elections. Respondents were then asked if they perceives themselves as voting “*All of the time*”, “*Most of the time*”, “*About half the time*”, “*Seldom*” or “*Never*”. The following graph illustrates the frequency-of-voting profile of the remaining respondents:



-- Right Direction/Wrong Track?

By a fairly strong plurality, voters believe that things in their county are headed on the “*wrong track*”, as opposed to going in the “*right direction*”. Even though only a third of the survey respondents said “*right direction*”, this result compares quite favorably with recent statewide numbers, where only 17 percent of respondents said “the country” is headed in the right direction, and a mere 13 percent offered this assessment for the direction of the state as a whole. In addition, the number of “undecided” respondents for the county rating is over twice that of the state and the nation, indicating a lack of strong conviction on the question that is likely borne of the relative obscurity of county government.



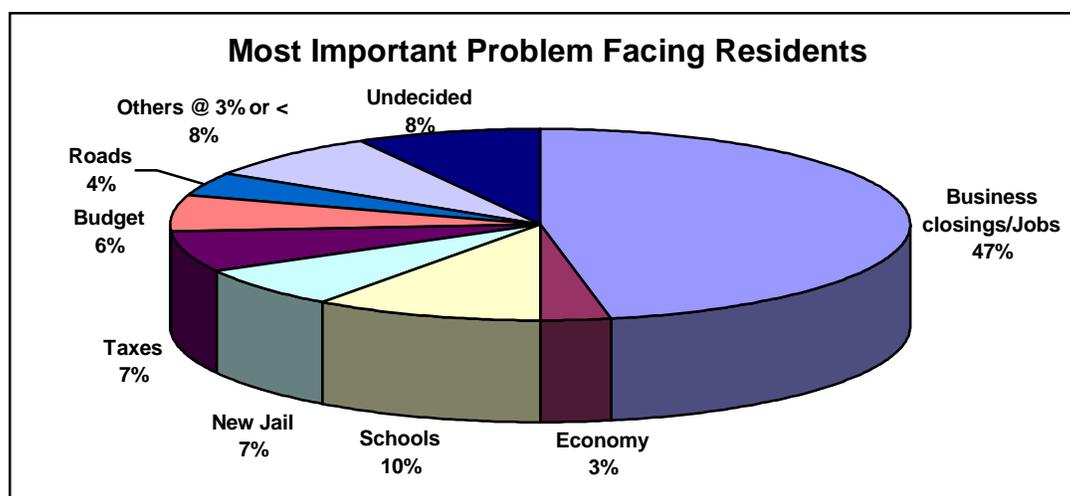
Even so, this measurement of the climate in which a question involving a tax increase would be posed does not auger well for passage.

-- Biggest problem (open-ended)/Biggest Concern (closed question)

In an initial open-ended test, respondents volunteered “*Business closings/Jobs*” as the biggest problem to be addressed by county government, at very strong plurality of 47 percent. When combined with the three percent citing the related category of “*The Economy*”, an even half of all respondents named considerations involving overall economic health as the top problem facing residents of their community. In a distant second, cited by 10 percent, was “*Schools*”, and tied for third, at seven percent each, were “*Taxes*” and significantly, “*New Jail*”, with, “*Taxes*” in fifth place, cited by six percent.

“*Business closings/Jobs*” was cited by significantly higher proportions of “half-time voters”, “women without a college degree”, “younger voters with a college degree”, “younger women”, and “household income under \$25,000”.

Those citing “*New Jail*” in proportions significantly higher than the norm included: “18-40 age group”, “in households with school age children”, “women with a college degree”, “younger women”, “Generation ‘X’” and “household income of \$25,000-\$50,000”.

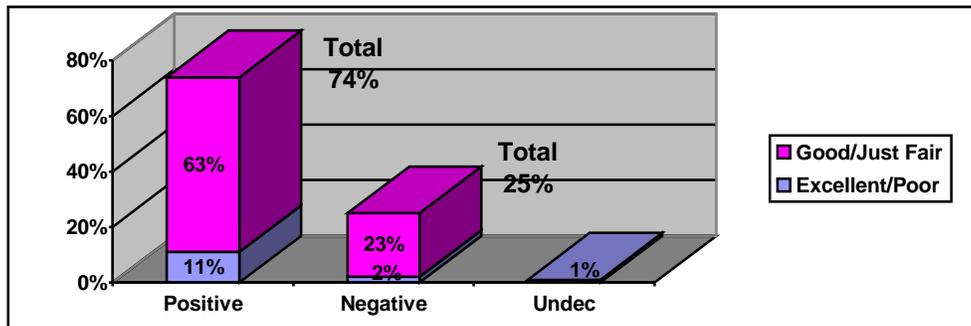


-- Positive/Negative Ratings For Delivery of Services – Why?

The Otsego County government garners a very high overall score from residents for the job it does in providing basic services, with nearly three-of-four issuing a “*Positive*” rating. This favorable response is tempered, however, by the relatively low 11 percent of them giving the county the highest rating of “*Excellent*”. When respondents who offered a positive rating were why they did so, the categories of “*Doing a good job*”, “*Good services*” and “*Trying hard*”, combined to account nearly two-thirds of the open-ended responses.

One-quarter of respondents issued a “*Negative*” rating, but as in the case of those issuing a positive rating, the intensity of the feeling was not great: only two percent gave a “*Poor*” rating, as opposed to “*Just fair*” description. The top reasons offered by those giving the county a negative rating included “*Poor leadership*”, “*Misspent money*” and “*Poor services*”; these

categories combined to account for 45 percent of the respondents’ open-ended reasons for issuing their negative rating. The chart below illustrates the responses:

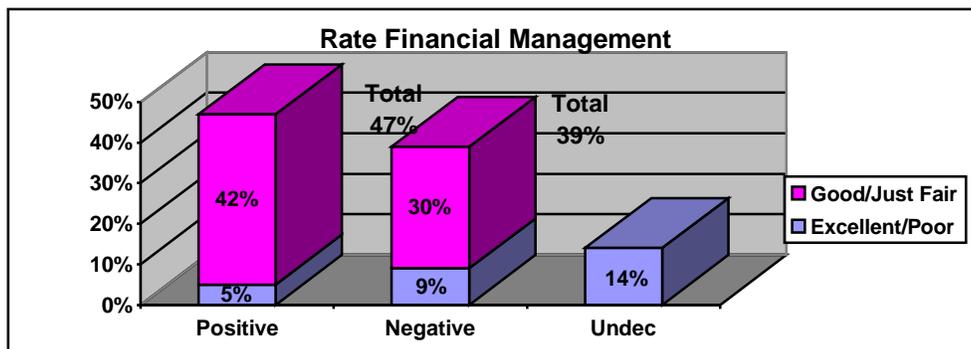


Even though the total “positive” job ratings are noteworthy, attention is drawn to the intensity of sentiment expressed. While these ratings indicate a high level of contentment with the job local officials are doing in the delivery of services, they do not suggest county voters are wildly enthusiastic, as demonstrated by the relatively low “excellent” portion of the positive rating. That is, a very strong majority of voters express general satisfaction, but the figures certainly do not indicate a sentiment that there is no room for improvement. On the bright side, the “excellent” portion makes up a little less than 20 percent of the total positive rating, while the “poor” portion of the negative rating is less than ten percent.

Interestingly, “Seldom voters” are among those subgroups that issue a positive rating in proportions greater than the norm. Other subgroups joining the “seldom voters” in issuing a higher than average “positive” rating include: those who believe their taxes are “about right”, residents who are 65 or older, and women with a college degree. Subgroups that issued “negative” rating in proportions higher than the norm include: 18-40 and 56-64 age group, those with “H.S. education or less, younger respondents without a college degree, younger men and “X” generation.

-- Positive/Negative Ratings For Managing Finances

In contrast to their rating of the county for the delivery of basic services, fewer than half of the respondents issued a “Positive” rating for the county’s financial management, although a plurality landed in this category. The 27 point drop in the positive rating for overall service delivery is not entirely made up by a like rise in the “Negative” ratings, but it is split almost evenly with those responding “Undecided”. The following chart illustrates the rankings.

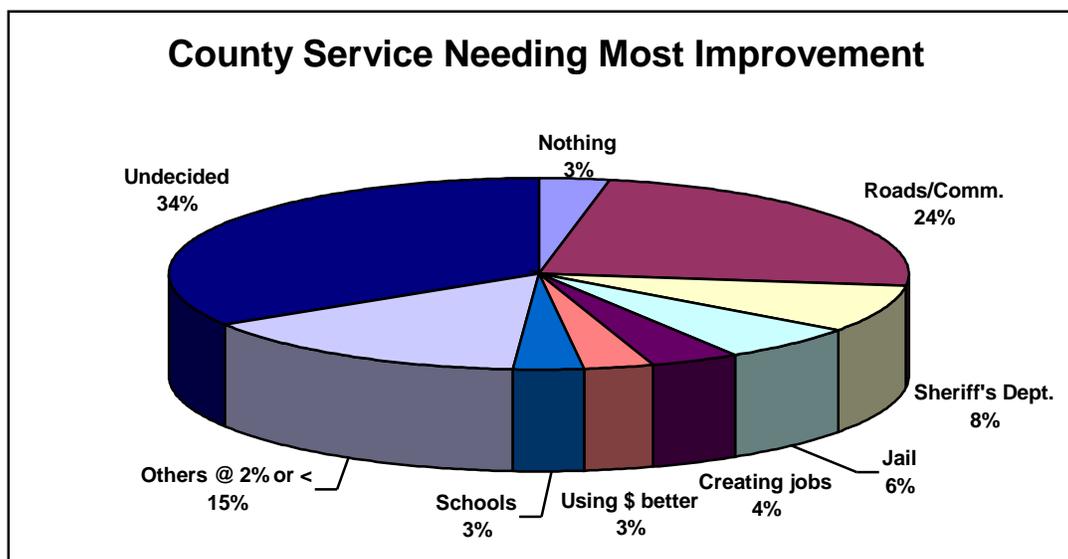


All women respondents, along with those who believe their tax level is “about right,” respondents who are 65 or older, those who believe the jail is “overcrowded,” “Yes” voters on the various ballot tests in the survey and older women, were among the subgroups issuing a positive rating for financial management in proportions greater than the norm.

Subgroups issuing a “negative” rating in proportions greater than the norm included: all men, especially those without a college degree; the 50-55 age group; those who believe there is currently “enough room” at the jail; respondents with a high school education or less; “no voters” on the various ballot tests in the survey; and the “Boom” generation.

-- What County Service Needs the Most Improvement?

As has been typical in surveys assessing county services, a large number of respondents cite “Roads” as a top area needing attention. This is, of course, a source of frustration for counties, since the county government has little direct control over the day-to-day activities associated with county roads. Nevertheless, about a quarter of the respondents cited roads as an area in need of major improvement and believe it is the county government’s responsibility. Similarly, some respondents cited “Schools” as an area of county government that needs improving (only three percent). Over one-third of those surveyed were unable to identify a service provided by the county that they believe needed improvement. The chart below illustrates the distribution:

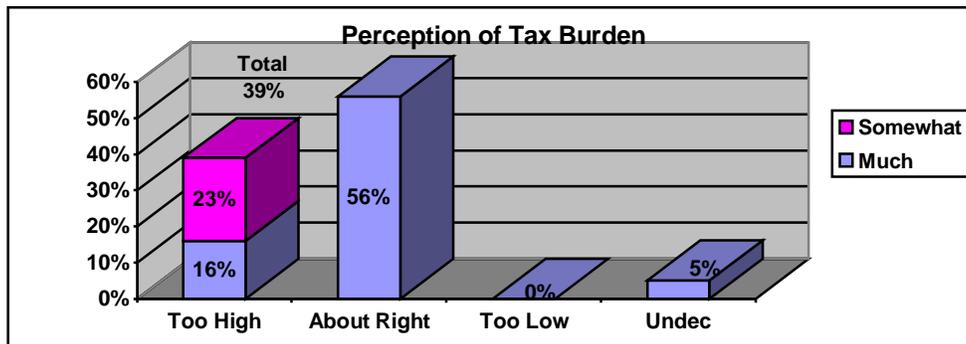


Subgroups citing “Jail” in proportions greater than the norm included: 18-40 age group; younger respondents without a college degree; household income of \$25,000 or less.

-- Perception of Tax Burden

A good harbinger for the chances of passing a ballot proposal to increase taxes lies in a community’s perception of its current tax burden. Respondents were asked if their local property taxes and fees were too high, too low, or about right for what they get back in services from the county. If respondents said “too high”, a follow-up question asked them to indicate whether the taxes are “much” or “somewhat” too high.

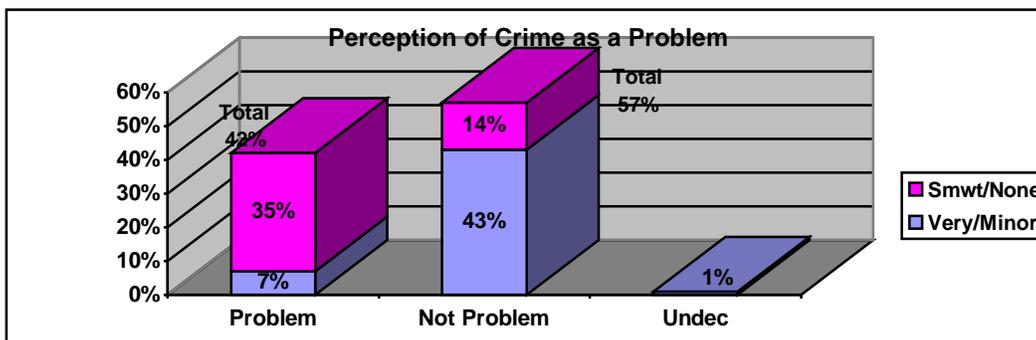
Typically, those jurisdictions having success in passing a property tax increase will exhibit a “taxes-too-high” score in the mid-20 percent range or lower. If a district’s residents say “too high” in the 40 percent range or higher, the environment is too hostile to have much hope of passing any tax increase. As the chart below indicates, the environment in which the proponents of a new jail measure are currently operating leans more toward the latter end of the spectrum, with nearly four-in-ten Otsego voters believing their taxes are already “too high”. The following graph illustrates the relative intensity of the respective perceptions:



Groups registering a higher than survey wide belief that their taxes are “*Too High*” include: all men; the 50-55 age group; those who believe the jail currently has “enough room”; respondents with a H.S. education or less; “No” voters on the various ballot tests in the survey; household income \$25,000 or less.

-- Perception of Crime as a Problem

Respondents were next asked to indicate the degree to which they perceive crime to be a problem in their community. With only one percent reporting they were “*Undecided*” on the question, voters in Otsego County have solid views – one way or another – on crime as a problem. As seen in the chart below, a fairly strong majority of respondents do not view crime as rising to the level of being even a “*somewhat serious problem*”, and indeed, nearly a quarter of these respondents report that crime in their community is “*not really a problem at all*”.

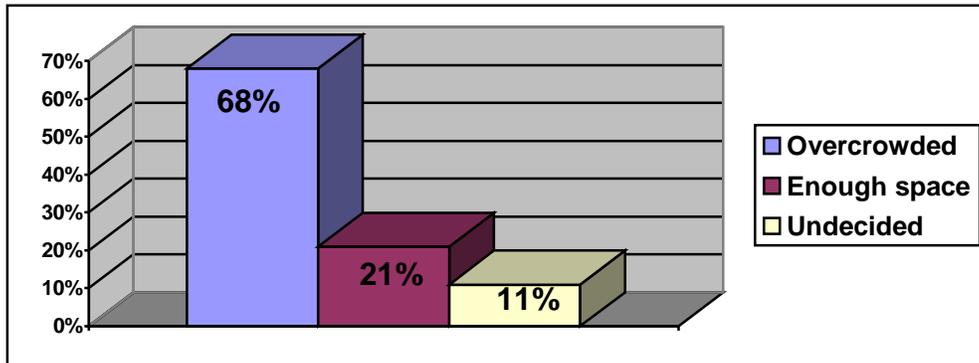


Subgroups reporting their perception of crime as being at least a “somewhat serious” problem include: respondents reporting they vote “most of the time” in local elections; all women; the “50-55 and 65 and over” age groups; those with a post high school. education”; “yes” voters on the various ballot tests in the survey; areas residence of “25 years to lifetime”; women without a

college education; older without a college education; older women; “Silent generation”; household income of “\$25,000 and under” and “\$25,000 to \$50,000”.

-- Awareness of Jail Overcrowding/What to do About It?

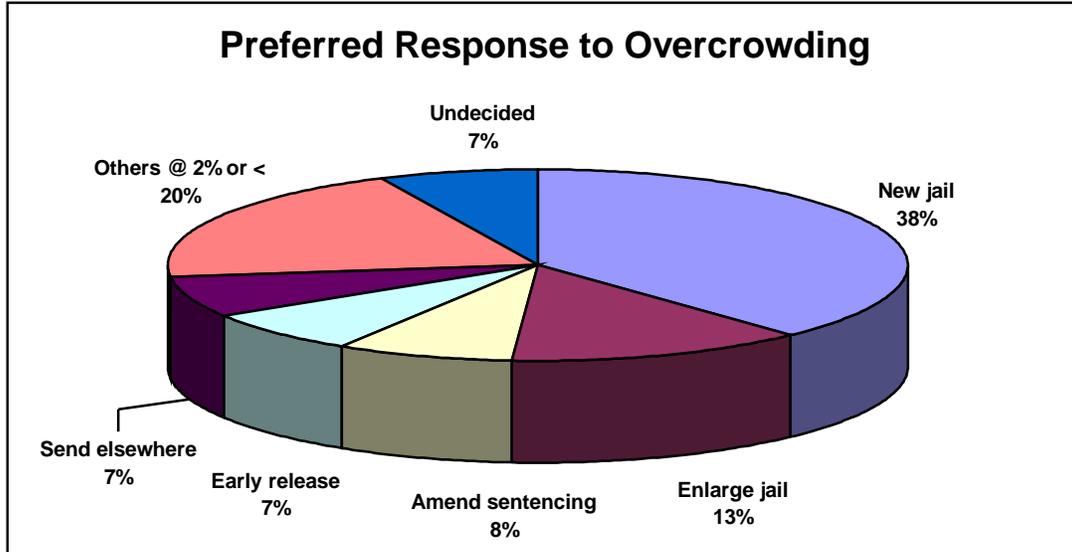
In an attempt to measure the extent to which Otsego County voters are aware the existing jail faces chronic overcrowding problems, respondents were asked whether or not they believed there is an overcrowding problem, or if they believe the *status quo* provides enough space. As the chart below demonstrates, just fewer than one-third of the respondents were either “Undecided” about the question, or said there is currently adequate jail space to house the county’s prisoners.



Subgroups reporting, “Enough space” in proportions greater than the norm included: respondents who said their taxes are “too high”; the “18-40” and “50-55” age groups; “no” voters on the various ballot tests in the survey; younger voters without a college degree; younger women; “\$50,000 to \$75,000 household income” respondents;

Among those who reported belief that there was an overcrowding problem by margins greater than the norm were: respondents who thought their taxes were “about right”; the “56-64” age group; “yes” voters on the various ballot tests in the survey; those who have lived in the area for “11-25 years”; and household incomes of “\$25,000 or under” and “over \$75,000”.

Among the over two-thirds who recognized and acknowledged an jail overcrowding problem, a follow-up question was posed, asking them to offer what they thought Otsego County ought to do to address the situation. While there were a smattering of unworkable responses such as “Make jail more uncomfortable”, “Make prisoners pay” and “Privatize”, the largest single response was, “Build a new jail”, which was offered by nearly four-in-ten of the respondents who believe that there is overcrowding. The following chart illustrates the distribution:



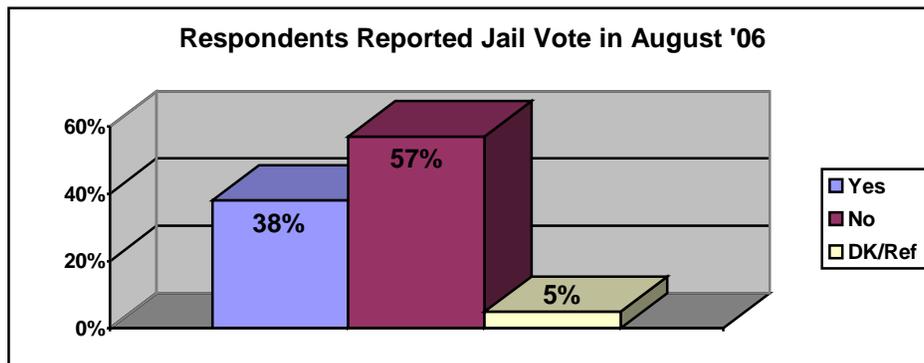
Subgroups suggesting that a new jail be built in proportions greater than the norm included: respondents “65 years or older”; “yes” voters” on the various ballot proposals tested throughout the survey; women with a college degree; younger women; the “X” generation”.

Respondents who report voting “half the time” in local elections; respondents who believe their taxes are “too high”; and the “50-55” and “56-64” age groups offered “*New jail*” as a solution to overcrowding in proportions significantly lower than the norm.

-- The August 2006 Vote: Who Voted and How Did They Vote

After hearing a brief description of what was on the ballot last August, respondents were asked if they voted in that election, and the means by which they cast their ballot. The majority, 88 percent of all respondents, said they had participated in the August 2006 regular primary election, with 69 percent of these reporting they went to the polls and another 19 percent saying they had voted *via* absentee ballot; 11 percent of the respondents said they had not gone to the polls, with one percent unable to remember.

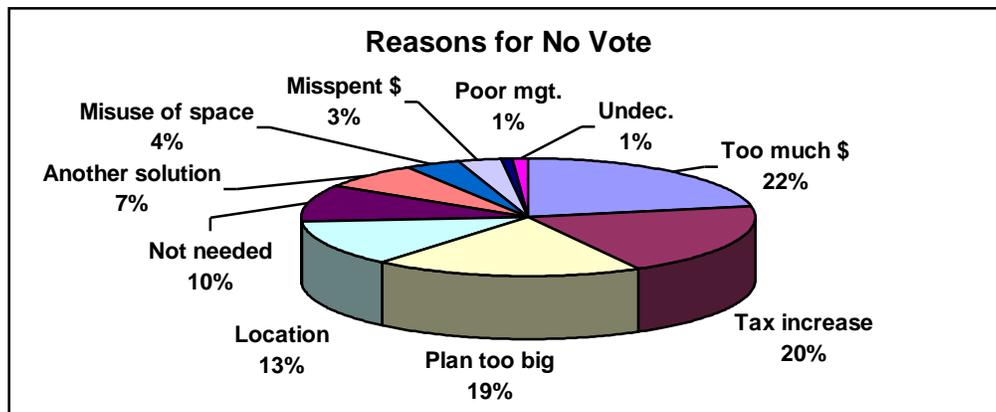
Of those said they voted, 38 percent said they voted “Yes” on the new jail proposal and 57 percent reported having voted “No”, with five percent refusing to answer or volunteering they could not remember.



Subgroups reporting a “Yes” vote in proportions greater than the norm included: those who said they vote “most of the time” in local elections; residents who believe their taxes are “about right”; the age group of “18-40” and “65 and older”; respondents who say the jail is “overcrowded”; “Yes” voters” on the several ballot questions in the survey; residents of “11-25 years” in the area; women with a college education; younger women; younger men; with household incomes of “\$25,000 or less”.

Respondents reporting a “No” vote in significantly higher proportions than the survey-wide average included: residents who report voting “all the time” in local elections; respondents who believe their taxes are “too high”; the mid-range age groups of “41-49; 50-55 and 56-64”; those with a “H.S. education or less”; “No” voters on the several ballot questions in the survey; women without a college degree; and older men.

Among those respondents voting “No”, a follow-up open-ended question asked them to cite their main reason was for casting a “no” vote. The three responses of “Too much money”, “Tax increase” and, “Too big a plan” combined to garner nearly two-thirds of all nine separate reasons offered by the these respondents. The following chart illustrates the distribution:



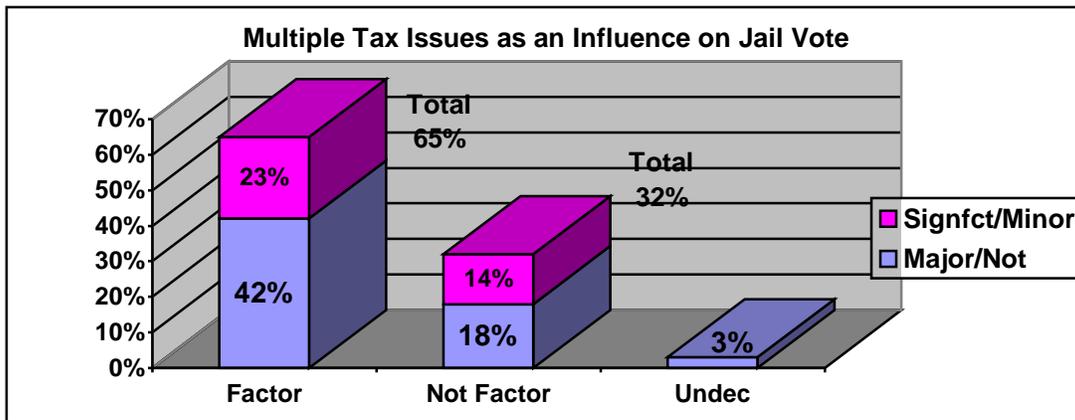
-- Why Did the August 2006 Jail Proposal Fail?

All respondents were asked identify the reasons why most voters who opposed the proposal did so, from the choices of “the amount of the tax increase”, “the specific plan” or, “some other reason”. Just over half of the all respondents selected “the amount of the tax increase” as the reason why most “no” voters opposed the plan, with only 18 percent opting for “the specific plan” as the root of the opposition. Somewhat surprisingly, over one quarter of the respondents volunteered other reasons, such as, “Location” (offered by 18 percent), “Too many proposals” (five percent) and “Both equally” (four percent), along with five other separate reasons ranking at one percent.

-- Influence of Other Ballot Proposals

A strong majority of respondents said they believed the presence of multiple tax issues on the August 2006 ballot was a factor in the defeat of the jail proposal. Respondents were offered the options of the other issues being a “Major factor”, “Significant factor”, “Only a minor factor” or “Not a factor at all” in the defeat of the jail issue. As demonstrated in the following graph, a

majority of respondents who believed it to be a factor called it a “major” factor, and a majority of those who did not believe it to be a factor said it was “no factor at all”.



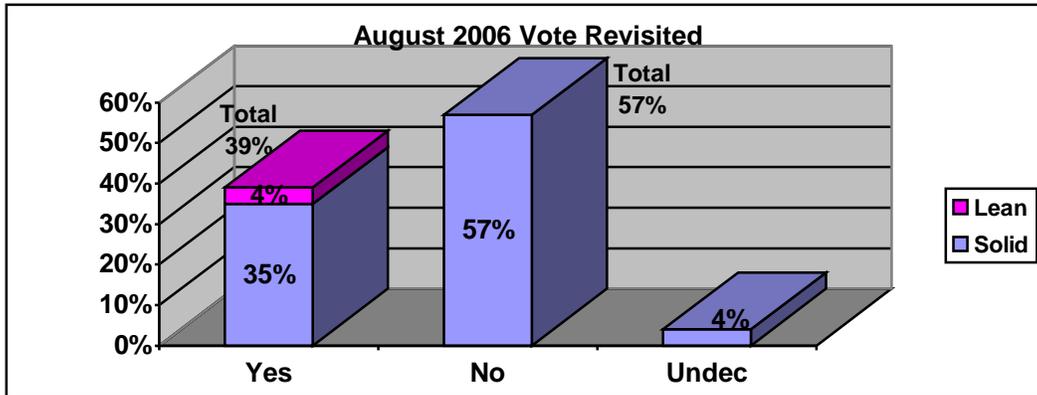
Respondent subgroups reporting the multiple issues as at least a “significant” factor in the defeat of the jail proposal included: “18-40” age group and those “65 and older”; respondents who say the jail is “overcrowded”; “Yes voters” on the various tests throughout the survey; younger women and men; and those with household income of “oOver \$75,000”.

The subgroups indicating a belief that the multiple issues were either only a “minor” factor or “no factor at all”; included: respondents who report voting in local elections “half the time”; residents who believe their taxes are “too high”; the “50-55” age group” respondents who believe the current jail has “enough room”; those with “H.S. education or less”; and “No” voters on the various tests in the survey.

It is interesting to note that many of the same subgroups that reported having voted “Yes” on the August jail proposal in greater proportions than the norm, are the same groups expressing a belief that the multiple issues on that ballot were a factor in the jail proposal’s defeat. Likewise, many of the subgroups that voted “No” in August in disproportionate numbers show up in this question as being above the norm in their belief that multiple issues were only a minor factor or no factor at all in the jail proposal’s defeat. This observation suggests that even had the jail proposal stood alone on the August ‘06 ballot, a significant number of voter groups would still have voted to reject it by margins exceeding the actual “No” vote.

-- Replay Vote

Next in the survey, respondents are again presented with the question they faced in August of 2006 on the question of funding a new, 120 bed jail to be constructed at the Alpine Center, and asked how they would vote on it “today.” Substantiating the observation made in the immediately preceding question, regarding the solidity of opposition among a substantial portion of the “No” voters, this replay of the August jail question vote produced results nearly identical to those found earlier in the survey, when respondents were asked how they had actually voted. Indeed, this “re-vote” nearly replicates the actual “Yes/No” totals from the election. The chart below demonstrates the “vote” in this latest posing of the question:



The “Lean” category refers to respondents who at first said they were “Undecided” but when pressed by the interviewer to indicate the way they would vote if they had to “decide right now”, offer a position. “Leaners” are considered in the trade to be not especially committed to their stated preference.

As noted, the results of the “Vote replay” are nearly identical to those earlier in the survey, when respondents were asked how they voted in August of ’06. Moreover, by allocating the customary two-thirds of the “Undecided” vote to the “No” category, along with discounting the four percent of the Yes “leaners”, the results are nearly identical to the actual August vote. These results further substantiate the observation in the earlier question, that the presence of multiple tax questions on the August 2006 ballot was of no consequence to a significant segment of the No voters – both in actual vote in August of 2006, as well as in the hypothetical stand alone inquiry in the spring of 2007.

-- Advocacy Arguments – Supporting arguments much stronger

Following the vote replay, respondents were asked to put aside how they responded to the up or down “vote ‘today’” test of the proposal, and were urged to offer their opinion about whether or not they found advocacy arguments, both for and against the ballot proposition, to be “Very convincing”, “Somewhat convincing”, or “Not convincing at all”. As noted earlier, a split sample format was used, wherein half of all respondents heard supporting arguments first, followed by arguments in opposition. For the other half of the sample this order of presentation was reversed. There were thirteen statements developed in support of the proposal and ten arguments delivered in opposition. Respondents were asked to “vote” again on the proposal after each set.

When the results of the two split forms are blended, of the thirteen arguments offered in support of the proposal, eleven were rated “somewhat convincing” by at least a majority of respondents. However, in these sorts of tests, only those arguments breaching the 60 percent “convincing” level are generally considered to be of value when advancing a proposition. Using this criterion, the salient number of arguments drops to eight, with half of these rated “convincing” by 65 percent or less.

The chart below lists the top eight proponents arguments in descending order of “convincingness”.

Arguments in Support of the 120-Bed Jail Millage Proposal

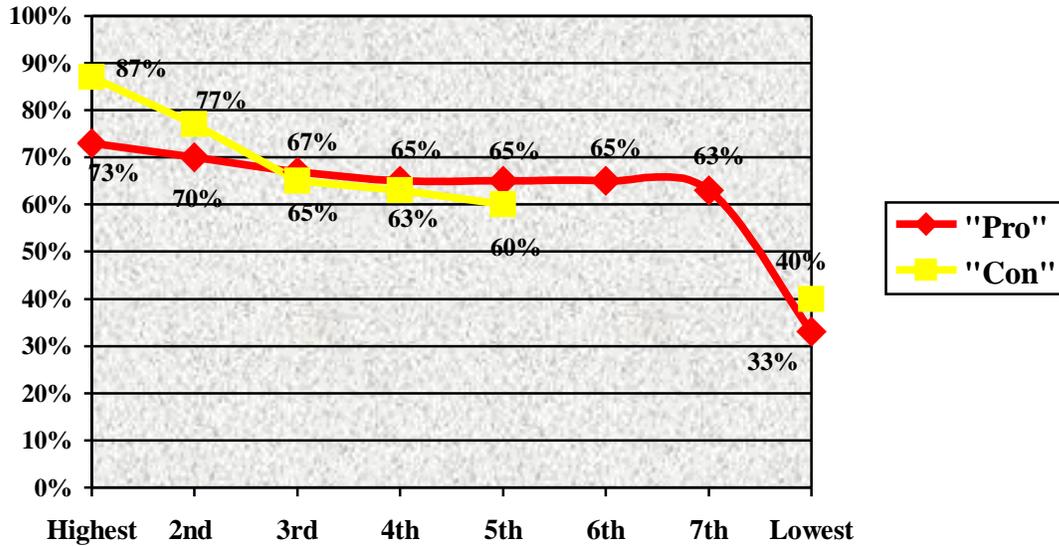
	CONVINCING			Not	undec
	very	some	Total		
By law the jail cannot continue to hold prisoners if jail population exceeds 34 prisoners for more than 10 days. This means that there have been early releases required for drug convictions, arson, drunk driving, fraud, bad checks, larceny, assault and battery, failure to register as a sex offender, and selling cocaine	46%	27%	73%	25%	2%
Public safety is diminished when people are not held accountable for their actions. The judicial system release many prisoners early, not as a result of good behavior, or completion of corrective programs, but because of lack of space	37%	33%	70%	25%	5%
The current jail only has space for four prisoners per cell, but each cell usually has 8 to 10 inmates in it, which creates conflict between prisoners and increases the danger for sheriff’s deputies.	39%	28%	67%	31%	1%
There is not enough space to make sure hard core prisoners are separated from first time offenders, or young inmates are not housed with career criminals.	41%	24%	65%	30%	5%
The site at Alpine Center is the best location because it can be connected to the courts through a tunnel, which will greatly reduce the risk of escape, the county already owns the land, and essential services are already available	39%	26%	65%	34%	1%
The current 34 bed county jail was built in 1967 when the population was 10,000 people. Today the population is almost 26,000 and in 2020, it will be 35,000 people. We have outgrown the current jail and need to build one for the future.	35%	20%	65%	34%	1%
The proposed new jail will have only one story above ground, which will appear to be a typical office building, it will not be visible from the high school and it is located further from that school than the St. Mary’s School building where the current jail is located.	30%	33%	63%	33%	1%
Currently, there are more than 1,000 arrest warrants outstanding – 128 of them for serious crimes – because there is not enough space in the county jail.	41%	21%	62%	32%	6%

In contrast to the supporting arguments, where eight of thirteen arguments breached the 60 percent “convincing” mark, only five of the ten opposing arguments were viewed as being at least “*somewhat convincing*” by 60 percent or more of voters. However, the top two opposing arguments were deemed convincing by margins significantly exceeding the best of the supporting statements. Moreover, the intensity of the feelings about the most compelling opposing argument were far above anything seen in the supporting arguments tests, as illustrated by the proportion of respondents finding an arguments to be “*very convincing*”. In keeping with findings elsewhere in several parts of the survey, it is not surprising these arguments articulate the anxiety voters feel about the current state of the state and local economy.

Arguments in Opposition to the 120-Bed Jail Millage Proposal

	CONVINCING			Not	undec
	<i>very</i>	<i>some</i>	Total		
With a continuing concern about the economy and layoffs, now is a bad time to consider a tax increase for any purpose	62%	25%	87%	12%	1%
With the state considering tax increases for roads and to balance the state budget, we really need to know where we stand on other taxes before increasing taxes for a new jail in Otsego County	46%	31%	77%	19%	4%
The proposed new jail will be too extravagant; we don’t need space for 120 beds since that’s twice the number of prisoners than when we have had our most severe overcrowding issues.	41%	24%	65%	33%	2%
The current jail can be expanded to house more prisoners, and it would solve the overcrowding problem for several years before we had to build a new jail, and this could be done for less money than a new jail	29%	34%	63%	33%	1%
As an alternative to a new prison the county could rent bed space from other counties for less cost than building a jail.	30%	30%	60%	38%	2%

Proponents vs. Opponents Arguments
Relative Level of "Convincingness"



As can be seen, the top two opponents' arguments are significantly more powerful than those of the supporters. With such high numbers finding both statements convincing reasons to vote "no" on the proposal, there were not very many subgroups who were beyond the norm in thinking so.

Nevertheless, several groups did emerge. Those who found the statement that:

"With a continuing concern about the economy and layoffs; now is a bad time to consider a tax increase for any purpose." was convincing in proportions above the norm; included: *"Split form B"* respondents (the half of the sample that heard opposing arguments first); respondents who reported voting *"Seldom"* in local elections; those asserting that there is currently *"Enough room"* in the jail; respondents voting *"No"* on the several tests in the survey and *"Younger voters without a college education"*.

For the statement:

"With the state considering tax increases for roads and to balance the state budget, we really need to know where we stand on other taxes before increasing taxes for a new jail in Otsego County.", the following subgroups found it to be convincing in proportions significantly higher than the overall 77 percent: The *"41-49 age group"*; those asserting that there is currently *"Enough room"* in the jail; respondents voting *"No"* on the several tests in the survey; residents living in the area for the last *"11-25 years"*; respondents with *"School age children at home"*; *"College educated men"*; *"Younger voters without a college education"*; *"Younger women"* and those with *"Over \$75,000 household income"*.

In the case of the top proponents arguments, the statement that:

“By law the jail cannot continue to hold prisoners if jail population exceeds 34 prisoners for more than 10 days. This means that there have been early releases required for drug convictions, arson, drunk driving, fraud, bad checks, larceny, assault and battery, failure to register as a sex offender, and selling cocaine.” was found convincing by proportions significantly greater than the 73 percent overall figure among: those reporting that they vote in special elections *“Most of the time”* and those who report that they do so *“Seldom”*; respondents who believe their taxes are *“About right”*; the *“18-40 age group”*; respondents who express a belief that the jail is *“Overcrowded”*; respondents with a *“H.S. education or less”*; respondents voting *“Yes”* on the several tests in the survey; residents living in the area for *“10 years or less”* and the last; *“11-25 years”*; *“Younger voters without a college education”*; *“Younger men”*; and those with *“\$25,000 to \$50,000 household income”*;

For the statement:

“Public safety is diminished when people are not held accountable for their actions. The judicial system release many prisoners early, not as a result of good behavior, or completion of corrective programs, but because of lack of space.”, the following subgroups for it convincing in proportions greater than the 70 percent average: those reporting that they vote in special elections *“Most of the time”*; respondents who believe their taxes are *“About right”*; the *“18-40 age group”*; respondents who express a belief that the jail is *“Overcrowded”*; respondents with a *“H.S. education or less”*; respondents voting *“Yes”* on the several tests in the survey and those with *“\$25,000 to \$50,000 household income”*.

It is also noted that the *“Lowest”* (least convincing) arguments do not appear on the preceding charts, but are the lowest in both sets of arguments. They are:

Least convincing opponents’ argument at 40 percent is:

Why should taxpayers pay for the operation of a jail now when it will take at least two or three years to build a new jail?

Least convincing proponents’ argument at 33 percent is:

The current jail is closer to St. Mary’s Elementary School than the proposed site at Alpine Center is to the high school.

-- Re-votes

To test the depth of conviction respondents voiced in recalling how they voted in August and how they said they would vote again on the same issue prior to hearing arguments, respondents are asked to *“vote”* again after hearing each set of advocacy arguments. It is often the case in these kinds of surveys that after hearing arguments, either for or against, a significant portion of the sample will move away from the position they took initially. Moreover, if this occurs, researchers can point to those arguments that had the greatest influence in accounting for the shift in position. Because so much of the *“No vote”* in the current survey is calcified, the ability to point to good examples of movement away from that position is limited.

The table below illustrates the outcomes of the several “re-votes” taken after arguments:

“SSA” and “SSB” refer to Split Sample A, and Split Sample B. In SSA, proponents’ arguments are offered first, followed by opponents’ arguments. In SSB, this order of presentation is reversed.

	Solid Yes	Lean Yes *	Total Yes	Total No	Lean No *	Solid No	Undec
August 2006 Vote	N/A	N/A	38%	57%	N/A	N/A	5%
Vote Replay	35%	4%	39%	57%	0%	57%	4%
SSA- after supporting arguments	44%	2%	46%	51%	1%	50%	3%
SSA – after opposing arguments	43%	1%	44%	53%	2%	51%	3%
SSB – after opposing arguments	30%	0%	30%	68%	1%	67%	2%
SSB – after supporting arguments	33%	3%	36%	62%	3%	59%	2%
Composite SSA/SSB	38%	2%	40%	57%	2%	55%	3%

* “Lean” refers to when the respondent initially says they are undecided. The interviewer asks a follow-up that urges a definitive yes or no response. “Leaners” are generally considered to be somewhat unreliable “yes” voters on tax issues, and are more easily swayed to the opposite category than those who lean no.

As is evidenced by the data in the table above, there is little doubt about that Otsego County voters react more favorably to the 120-bed jail proposal when arguments in favor of it are advanced – but not favorably enough to ever reach the level of support necessary for a majority vote in favor of the proposal. Moreover, proposals to increase taxes never operate in a vacuum, and it is clear that opposing arguments take their toll on support – particularly if they are presented to the voters first. Irrespective of the order of presentation, the solidity of the “no vote” reinforces the observation that Otsego voters harbor strong convictions about the interconnected issues of their view of the current taxation levels and the economic climate in the region.

-- Back-up plans

Where all the questions to this point had to do with a proposal to raise funds by assessing an additional 1.6 mills for twenty years that would raise \$13 million for a new 120-bed jail, the next two questions sought to measure the level to which, if any, support for addressing the jail overcrowding problem could be augmented by scaling back the scope of the project. The first of the back-up proposals tested called for raising \$10.5 million *via* the same 1.6 mill increase but reduced to a 15 year payoff for construction of a new – but smaller capacity – jail at the Alpine Center site; the second back-up described a proposal for 1.4 mill increase for ten years that would raise \$5.2 million to finance an expansion of the existing facility to approximately double the current capacity. In describing each of the back-up proposals, the respondent was informed of how much that would translate into in the way of additional property taxes for property of average market value (i.e. \$100,000) in the county.

It is important to note that only those who voted “No”, or “Undecided” in the final “vote ‘today’” tests of the original proposal for a new 120-bed facility were asked the question about the first

scaled back option. Likewise, only those saying “No” or “Undecided” again to the first scaled back new jail proposal were asked about a proposal to expand the current facility. This methodology presumes that those who were supportive of a new 120-bed jail would continue to support proposals that called for increasingly less capacity to house prisoners.

The following chart illustrates the movement of support, starting with the first August 2006 “vote replay” question. It is important to note that the composite figures for the back-up proposals represent a combination of those respondents saying “Yes” in the composite SSA/SSB questions, with those saying “Yes” to either of the back-ups.

	Solid Yes	Lean Yes *	Total Yes	Total No	Lean No *	Solid No	Undec
Vote Replay	35%	4%	39%	57%	0%	57%	4%
Composite SSA/SSB	38%	2%	40%	57%	2%	55%	3%
Composite 80-bed Back-up	45%	6%	51%	45%	2%	43%	4%
Composite Expansion Option	53%	8%	61%	35%	2%	33%	4%

* “Lean” refers to when the respondent initially says they are undecided. The interviewer asks a follow-up that urges a definitive yes or no response. “Leaners” are generally considered to be somewhat unreliable “yes” voters on tax issues, and are more easily swayed to the opposite category than those who lean no.

As can be clearly seen, support for the proposal goes up throughout the course of the survey: incrementally and statistically insignificantly at first after competing arguments, then a little more dramatically when the scope of the proposal is reduced. It seems obvious that the best chances for passing a proposal to address overcrowding in the Otsego County jail lies in coupling a robust information and advocacy campaign, with a request for no more additional prisoner housing than is required to meet immediate and shorter-term needs.

-- Vote Shift

Analysis of subgroups who move toward “Yes” is helpful in targeting groups who might be most amenable to efforts at disseminating information regarding the need for more space. The preceding chart shows an overall movement of 21 points toward a “Yes” vote (i.e. from 40% to 61%) from the Composite SSA/SSB to the Expansion Option. Moving toward “Yes” from the Composite SSA/SSB “vote” through the 80-bed new jail back-up and on to the Expansion Option in greater than average proportions were: respondents who report voting in local elections “all the time”; all women ; those who believe their taxes are “About right”; the “41-49” and “56-64” age groups; “H.S. education or less” and “college educated” respondents; residents who have lived in the area “11-25 years”; younger college educated voters; younger men; older women; those in the “Boom generation” and those with household income of “\$75,000 or more”. With few exceptions, and as would have to be the case with a large movement from No to Yes, these groups were consistently above the No “vote” norm throughout the survey.

Of special note is the movement of respondents who had consistently “voted” No in prior tests. The vote shift for this subgroup ranged from 23 percent among those “voting” No after hearing only the negative arguments, to 48 percent among Composite SSA/SSB No “voters”. Other subgroups exhibiting notable movement – albeit not exceeding the 21 percent average – included:

21% - *Those believing the current jail has “Enough” space
(5% Yes on Vote Replay – 29% Yes on Expansion extrapolation)*

20% - *\$50,000 to \$75,000 household income
(42% Yes on Vote Replay – 61% Yes on Expansion extrapolation)*

19% - *All Men
(39% Yes on Vote Replay – 60% Yes on Expansion extrapolation)*

*\$25,000 to \$50,000 household income
(44% Yes on Vote Replay – 65% Yes on Expansion extrapolation)*

18% - *Those believing their taxes are “Too High”
(21% Yes on Vote Replay – 41% Yes on Expansion extrapolation)*

Notwithstanding encouraging movement of these groups, the extrapolated “No” vote on the expansion option among those who believe their taxes to be “too high” and respondents asserting that there is currently “enough space” remains well above the norm. Since nearly four-in-ten voters believe their current tax burden is too high and over one-in-five do not think there is currently an overcrowding problem, their continued holding back on increased housing space for county prisoners is significant.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Proponents of passing a millage proposal to increase space to house prisoners in Otsego County are operating in an atmosphere where there is nearly universal concern over the health of the region’s current economy and anxiety about its future prospects. This angst is compounded – and probably a major source of – a widespread belief that local taxes are already too high, the less-than-stellar positive rating issued on the way the county handles its finances, and the weak (albeit far better than for the state and the nation) showing in regard to a belief that the county is on the “right track”.

While a large majority of respondents said the presence of multiple tax issues was at least a significant factor in the defeat of the August ’06 jail proposal, this sentiment is somewhat illusory. No doubt having four other requests for taxes on the same ballot did not help matters, but the “vote replay” that followed the multiple issue inquiry did not produce “Yes” responses for the 120-bed proposal standing on its own, in statistically significant higher proportions than were recorded when respondents were asked how they voted in the prior election, the re-vote after arguments, or with the actual August vote outcome. Moreover, cross tabulation analysis reveals that “Yes” voters were considerably more likely than the average to cite the presence of multiple tax issues as a reason for defeat, and “No” voters were considerably less likely to do so. Thus, while proponents of increased jail capacity should of course avoid placing a ballot question to effect this aim among others asking for a tax increase, the fact of multiple requests on the ballot – in and of itself – was not the root source of the previous defeat.

Several interrelated factors were at play in the voters' August 2006 sound defeat of the 120-bed new jail proposal. Chief among them of course, was the economic stagnation that continues to this day. News of plant closings, layoffs and the ongoing state budget crisis do not create the climate one would select in order to pass a tax increase for the purpose of constructing a facility that nearly a third of the electorate do not acknowledge as being necessary. It is also worth noting that the proposed Alpine Center location was unacceptable to a number of voters, as evidenced by the fair number of survey respondents citing this factor in open-ended responses, and the weak level of "convincingness" given to a supporting argument noting the relative similarity of locations of the current and proposed facilities in relation to schools.

The most compelling supporting arguments had to do with the rule of law, safety of deputies working at the jail, rational segregation of the jail population and the deleterious effects of early release of prisoners and non-execution of arrest warrants. As strong as these arguments are, however, they pale in the face of opponents arguments reminding voters of the economic straits area residents face.

The foregoing points to the conclusion that voters will not approve a new jail facility – of any bed size – to be built at the Alpine Center any time in the foreseeable future. What might pass electoral muster is an expansion of the current facility to address immediate and short-term prisoner housing needs. However, even though the extrapolated vote on an expansion proposal garnered a total "Yes vote" from 61 percent, only 53 percent were "solid" yes votes, with the balance being made up of "lean" yes. "Leaners" are generally considered to be somewhat unreliable "yes" voters on tax issues, and are more easily swayed to the opposite category than those who lean "no." In the world of ballot question survey research, a "solid" yes in percentages in the high 50s to low 60s should be achieved before a prognostication of likely success is offered. The numbers exhibited in the current test do not rise to that level, but are still encouraging enough that an attempt at a jail expansion millage is not an effort in futility. There are some ongoing caveats, however.

First, it is important to reiterate that the composite numbers assume continued support for an expansion of the existing facility from those who supported construction of a new 120-bed jail at a different site. The validity of this assumption was not tested, and it is perfectly conceivable that some support would be lost among the original "Yes" voters due to their belief that a "half-a-loaf" IS NOT better than none. In addition, the composite is the result of repeated attempts to appeal to "No" voters in a controlled interview setting, with a captive audience; a circumstance a campaign cannot replicate. To produce similar results in a campaign, similar tenacity in message delivery would have to be exhibited. Indeed, such tenacity and saturation of positive messages is a prerequisite to Election Day victory, irrespective of the amount of levy requested. Still, these results suggest a much higher probability of success with a far more modest request than was presented last August.

Continuing messages to communicate the overcrowding problem, with an emphasis on the inability to execute arrest warrants and the resultant impact on overall public safety and respect for the justice system, are necessary components in a public education effort, but they are not sufficient by themselves. While arguments of this nature were viewed as being "convincing" by a large majority of the respondents, a strong majority also indicated that crime in the area is, at

worst, only a minor problem. This latter perception renders the general public safety and rule of law arguments something of an abstraction to the voters, and are clearly trumped by anxiety about the state of the local economy and its ripple effect on attitudes toward taxation in general.

If it is decided to proceed with a jail expansion proposal, an effort should be made to investigate the possibility of extending the bond payoff beyond the ten years that was described in the survey. While doing so may not make the most sense from a municipal finance point of view, it can have the effect of reducing the monthly increase in payment that is being requested. When there is widespread concern about jobs and the economy, driving down the level of the monthly increase is a very important goal and will enhance the chances of success at the ballot box.

In a similar vein, characterizing the expansion option as the most fiscal prudent way to go at this time will address several reservations and concerns voters expressed in the survey. The reader is reminded that even though county government received a high (although not enthusiastic) “positive” rating for the delivery of basic services, its positive rating on the way it handles finances failed to reach a majority. In addition, in responses to the open-ended inquiry about why the August proposal failed, “too much money” and “too big a plan” combined to form a 40 percent plurality of the nine specific reasons cited. Scaling back by nearly half the number of additional beds proposed will certainly address these self-articulated concerns.

None of the foregoing observations and suggestions will serve to address voters’ concerns overnight. If proponents of increasing jail capacity want to again present a proposal to the voters of Otsego County, they should recognize that education and public information efforts of this scale seldom take less than four to six months to accomplish, and even then, they require a consistent and sustained effort. As noted earlier, passage of a ballot question to build a new jail facility is out of the question, based on this sounding of voter sentiment conducted in early May of 2007. However, with repeated messaging aimed at addressing the major reservations voters had about the former proposal, a scaled-back plan calling for limited expansion of the existing facility has a chance of finding favor with a majority of the county’s voters at a future election.

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