

“The Wrong Answer to the Right Question,” by Dr. Chris Jones

Franklin County has been ablaze with excitement, just not the kind of excitement they were expecting.

In small town Charleston, Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders is pushing forward with plans for a 3,000-bed prison that will cost at least \$1.5 billion to build.

This prison will have more beds than the 2690 residents of Charleston.

The costly project, which is one of Sanders’s key priorities, has outraged residents who say they were completely kept in the dark. Local officials, including Representative Jon Eubanks, only learned of the plan after the land was purchased. Several local elected representatives first heard about the plan over the radio, on the day of the public announcement. Senator Gary Stubblefield called the process “un-American,” and residents agree.

For context, Arkansas already incarcerates more residents per capita than any other state in the nation and more than any independent democratic country on the planet. But even those who are advocating for prison expansion argue Charleston is the wrong location.

They are loudly making the case that Franklin County’s infrastructure—water, sewer, and electricity—isn’t equipped for such a massive facility. Unfortunately, the Governor doesn’t seem to be listening.

Then there are those who make the economic argument. We can put aside the point that prisons should be about addressing crime, not about addressing economic inequalities. Even then, the promised 800 jobs sound good, but locals fear the project will forever alter their community while delivering few benefits, and jobs that will not actually go to local residents.

This isn't just a logistical issue; it's a human one. Between 1970 and 2005, the U.S. saw a significant increase in prison construction, particularly in rural Southern towns. These communities often anticipated *economic revitalization through job creation and local business growth*. However, many towns experienced **minimal economic benefits**. The anticipated jobs frequently went to non-local, specialized workers, and local businesses saw little to no increase in patronage. Moreover, the presence of a prison sometimes deterred other forms of economic development, as potential investors were reluctant to establish businesses near correctional facilities. **This led to economic stagnation and unfulfilled promises of prosperity.**

Franklin County residents fear a similar fate.

Advocacy groups like the Arkansas Justice Reform Coalition oppose the project, pointing to Arkansas's **extremely high incarceration rate**. Instead of spending \$1.5 billion to build a prison (and much more to operate it), they suggest investing in mental health care, education, small business support and job training—proven ways to reduce crime.

Even more troubling, other struggling communities in eastern and southern Arkansas have begged for the prison, seeing it as a way to expand their existing facilities. Yet, these communities are ignored as well. This disparity highlights a cruel truth: current Arkansas elected officials invest in incarceration instead of addressing the poverty and inequality that drive crime.

Asking how we bring real economic development to small rural towns is the right question. Spending well over a Billion dollars on more prison beds is the wrong answer to that right question.

Charleston residents are fighting back. They're organizing, speaking at legislative hearings, and demanding transparency. But the state must answer a fundamental question: **why double down on a broken system when we could invest in people instead of prisons?**

Arkansans must join this fight. Listen to Franklin County residents. Ask them how you can help. Then call your legislators. Demand a better plan and demand to know the details. **And ask yourself: is this really the best we can do?**

Share your thoughts and comments at chrisjoneslistens@gmail.com.