

## “Who Asked for This Prison? Not Franklin County.” by Dr. Chris Jones

Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders wants Arkansas taxpayers to foot the bill for the largest prison project in state history: an \$850 million (likely another underestimate), 3,000-bed mega-prison in Franklin County. And she’s doing it with a smile, wrapping it in tough-on-crime rhetoric and pretending the details don’t matter. But they do.

This prison plan is a complicated mess—financially, logistically, and politically. Sanders recently published an op-ed urging lawmakers to “finish the job.” But here’s the real question: Who asked for this prison? Certainly not the people of Franklin County, who learned about the project **after** the land was bought. That’s not transparency. That’s a shady backroom deal.

Let’s talk numbers. The proposed \$850 million price tag is questionable at best. Republican Senator Jimmy Hickey—who supports prison construction—tried to add a \$250 million contingency fund because he knows the actual cost could explode past \$1.5 billion. The amendment failed. But that doesn’t mean the cost won’t balloon. We’ve seen it happen in other states. And even if they build it, who’s going to work there? Nearly half of corrections officer positions in Arkansas were vacant in 2022. This new prison would need 800 more.

The governor’s op-ed doesn’t offer a staffing plan. It doesn’t show a full budget. It doesn’t explain why Franklin County, a rural area with limited services, was chosen. It doesn’t mention community input – because there was no community input. It doesn’t even admit there’s an alternative.

But there is an alternative. Republican Senator Bryan King, who represents the area, proposed a smarter approach: invest \$100 million in crime prevention, parole reform, and reentry support. These solutions that might reduce incarceration in Arkansas.

Sanders paints this Franklin County mega-prison as the only option. It’s not. It’s the laziest one.

And for Franklin County? It's a nightmare. The site is on solid rock, which means higher construction costs. It's over 30 minutes from the nearest hospital. The water supply is questionable. The fire department is volunteer based. The land may even hold archaeological significance, according to the Chickamauga Nation. None of this was addressed in the governor's plan—or even mentioned in her op-ed.

That's not just poor planning. That's deliberate avoidance.

At a recent town hall in Charleston, Republican Senator Gary Stubblefield and I stood together—yes, a rare bipartisan moment—because we'd both heard from residents. They're angry, confused, and rightfully skeptical. They weren't consulted. They weren't informed. And now, they're being asked to carry the burden.

Governor Sanders wants to “finish the job.” But this isn't leadership. It's political theater—heavy on slogans, light on substance.

Arkansas doesn't need a shiny new warehouse for incarceration. We need real answers, honest debate, and solutions that look upstream—before people end up behind bars.

Is this mega-prison inevitable? Only if we remain silent.

I urge everyone to call your elected officials and demand that they dig deeper into this prison expansion (including the land deal portion) AND that they vote no on this mega-prison. They need to hear from you.

Share your thoughts and comments at [chrisjoneslistens@gmail.com](mailto:chrisjoneslistens@gmail.com).