



RACINE COUNTY

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April 14, 2009

Representative Joe Parisi
Chair, Assembly Committee on Corrections & the Courts
Room 126 North, State Capitol
P.O. Box 8953
Madison, WI 53708-8953

Re: Assembly Bill 144

Dear Chairman Parisi:

We are writing to express our strong opposition to Assembly Bill (AB) 144. We do so because, however well intended, this bill exemplifies two troubling tendencies in recent state legislation: erosion of the autonomy of counties and their constitutional officers and cost-shifting to county property taxpayers.

The office of the county sheriff is one of the oldest in our legal system, and the sheriff has historically been the elected official directly responsible for operation of the county jail. In important respects consistent with our democratic principles, the sheriff shares fiscal responsibility for the jail with other elected officials, notably the county board of supervisors. And the state establishes some standards for jail administration, which Racine County strives always to meet.

But despite the state's supervisory authority over certain aspects of jail administration, the sheriff is responsible for how the jail is operated. And of equal importance is that county taxpayers are responsible for paying for that operation. In Racine County, and perhaps in many other Wisconsin counties, sheriff's department operations—both jail and patrol operations—account for the largest single expenditure of county property tax revenues.

The sheriff and the county board of supervisors are responsible to their taxpayers for the efficient and economical operation of the county jail. Because this bill arbitrarily limits a legitimate revenue source, it unacceptably intrudes upon the authority of these local elected officials to operate a safe and humane jail with minimum tax burden on their constituents.

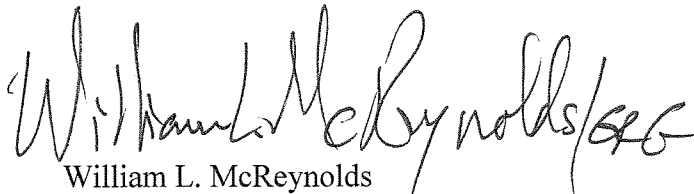
This is no small matter. These are difficult times, with county revenues down and taxpayers apprehensive about their ability to pay continually increasing levies. By our calculation, the pending budget will shift costs to Racine County taxpayers *for human services alone*, by an amount greater than the 3% operating levy increase that the budget will permit. That already threatens our ability to deliver services that our citizens need.


This bill will exacerbate the cost shifting to county property taxpayers. We estimate that, if enacted, it will reduce our jail telephone revenues by roughly 75%. Making up that shortfall will require a property tax increase of more than 0.75%, which amounts to one-fourth of the maximum levy increase permitted in the budget bill—an increase already eaten up by the budget's human services cost shifting.

Simply put, if this bill is enacted, forcing us to reduce Racine County Jail inmate telephone costs, there will have to be reductions in patrol operations or in other areas of county services.

For these reasons, we strongly oppose this bill and urge the committee not to recommend its passage.

Sincerely,


William L. McReynolds
Racine County Executive


Robert D. Carlson
Racine County Sheriff

Copies to: Members of the Committee
 Racine County Legislative Delegation