

**WHATCOM COUNTY
EXECUTIVE'S OFFICE**
County Courthouse
311 Grand Ave. Suite #108
Bellingham, WA 98225



Jack Louws
County Executive

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Whatcom County New Jail Update

Over the last decade, our community has identified the need for a new correctional facility. In the last three years, one of my priorities as Whatcom County Executive has been to bring this planning effort to a reality. Using the recommendations from the Jail Planning Task Force that issued their final report in 2012, I have worked closely with the County Sheriff to inform the Whatcom County Council and the community on this issue. Whatcom County has purchased land on LaBounty Road, accomplished a Needs Assessment and completed pre-design work on a new 521 bed correctional facility that incorporates space for the mental and physical health of the inmates. With this work behind us, it is now time for us to fund the construction and operation of this much needed regional correctional facility.

My administration has been working diligently with all our cities on a jail facility use agreement. This long-term agreement outlines the financing arrangements needed by the county to issue bonds to construct the facility. Before we can do that, you, the voters, will be asked to approve a 2/10th of 1% increase in sales tax either in August or November of this year. The approximate cost of the facility is one hundred million dollars, with an additional eighteen million dollars needed for the construction of the Sheriff's headquarters paid for out of existing county revenue. The agreement also outlines the fee structure that fairly allocates the ongoing operating cost of the facility between the cities and the county. I'm hopeful we will have positive decisions from the 7 cities and the County Council concerning this agreement prior to the May 8th ballot submission deadline for the August primary, giving the voters the opportunity to weigh in on the proposal. If this timeline is not met, I will continue to work toward resolution from the 8 legislative bodies in time for the November general election.

I believe we have sized the facility appropriately. The Jail Planning Task Force identified the need of 500-700 beds, the architectural team working with our staff sized an appropriate facility of 545-664 beds, and we are proposing a facility of 521 beds in Phase 1, with an additional 128 beds available in Phase 2 when needed. Using 80% occupancy as most efficient for operations, the new jail will house 417. Our 2014 average daily population was 403.

Over 33% of the new jail facility will be space for programs, including medical and dedicated behavioral health services. These new dedicated medical and behavioral health areas will be a vast improvement from what exist in the current jail. Approximately 3800 square feet of the 7900 square foot medical services facility will be dedicated specifically for mental health use. The medical facility will include offices, interview rooms and cells, medical offices and a 17-bed capacity for special need housing. This is a substantial upgrade from existing conditions for people with medical needs.

During the pre-design phase of the new correctional facility the decision was made not to locate a pre-arrest mental health triage center on the correctional facility campus. This was because behavioral health experts were concerned with stigmatizing individuals who received behavioral health treatment at the jail, in situations not requiring incarceration. I am committed to providing and enhancing our programs to keep people out of jail if they should not be there. The 16-bed triage facility the county currently operates in the Bakerview area of Bellingham will either be expanded or relocated to better serve our community when the new jail is opened, and new opportunities are becoming available to significantly expand our existing programs. We currently spend over four million dollars per year on programs that directly or indirectly reduce inmate population, and we are constantly looking for ways to enhance our programs related to public health and welfare.

This last council meeting day, March 31, Council heard from Anne Deacon, the County Health Department Human Services Manager, regarding what is already in place for jail alternative programs in Whatcom County. The audio of this presentation, and of others related to the jail proposal, are available on the County website: <http://wa-whatcomcounty.civicplus.com/agendacenter> . I invite you to listen.

Whatcom County jail is one of two jails in Washington State that is certified by the National Commission on Correctional Healthcare. As a result of this certification, the standards for behavioral health care in our jail are already higher than in most jails. One of the standards is 24-hour response to referrals for behavioral health services. Additionally, the county has juvenile drug court, teen court, and mental health court to provide specific services to these at risk groups.

As a community, we have an important decision to make concerning the construction and operation of a new correctional facility. I believe it is the right decision to fund and build this project. Nationally, construction costs have escalated 46% since 2005, and they are estimated to increase an additional 13% prior to the proposed bid date of this project. Along with the financial reality of increasing costs, we have severe life-safety issues with our current facility that needs immediate attention if we decide not to build. Coupled with our desire to have dedicated space for the first time in our history as a county for the humane treatment of the inmates with mental and physical health issues, I believe the time is now for our community move forward with this project.

So, I urge you to stay involved and informed. We keep our jail information pages as current as possible, <http://wa-whatcomcounty.civicplus.com/446/New-Jail-Information>. Many relevant documents are there to show you what we have done and what we are proposing for this vital community project. Please join us at council meetings for updates. Also, I am interested in your comments. Contact me at jlouws@co.whatcom.wa.us or 360-676-6717.

Respectfully, Jack Louws