

From: dbobena@yahoo.com
To: SAC
Cc: Council; cmail@cob.org
Subject: How can we be confident we won't just build another Whatcom County Jail?
Date: Tuesday, May 10, 2022 6:33:57 PM

Dear Stakeholder Advisory Committee:

When I think about the breaking the legacies of violence, displacement, migration, and settlement that have characterized our past and the injustice inflicted upon people who are indigenous to our region, it occurs to me that the level of change required to do that is much greater than what any of us contemplate when actually proposing actions to do that. There are many landmark moments in our history, like the right to vote finally being guaranteed to Native Americans in every U.S. state just 58 years ago, that remind us how slow and restrained we have been in regard to breaking those legacies. Meanwhile, Native Americans [continue to suffer many obstacles to voting](#), continued injustice, and last year was the first one that a Racial Equity Commission was funded by our local governments here.

I listened to Whatcom County Prosecutor Eric Richey's presentation at [yesterday's 5/9/22 Bellingham City Council Committee of the Whole meeting](#). My understanding of his priorities were those of advocating for a new jail with more space, and for community members to call for their legislators to pass stricter penalties for violating certain laws. Mentioning medical and behavioral health was at the bottom of his list of causes for crimes, and treatment for those health issues was again at the bottom of his list for answers to it.

I think we have to question whether bringing mental and behavioral health services onto lists related to justice at all, at this point, should be viewed as a victory and whether our community members who have been calling for those services for decades are going to be - or should be - satisfied with that.

Additionally, I think it is important for your committee to also reflect on the fact that while you all are just a portion of your way through the process of guiding "the development of the Justice Project (public health, safety and justice facility needs assessment)" - to say nothing of the needs assessment itself not having begun - that at least eight members of the Stakeholder Advisory Committee, most of which are in some of the most significant positions of power that exist in Whatcom County, have come out to publicly support a new jail.

In the [April 7, 2022 letter that all the mayors in Whatcom County sent to the SAC](#), the mention of mental and behavioral health treatment was also the ending of that letter, not the beginning of it. In Bellingham City Council

Member Dan Hammill's comment after Prosecutor Richey's presentation yesterday, his support of a jail came before including his support of mental and behavioral health services. Meanwhile, when bringing up that there is a shortage of workers to provide those services, Council Member Hammill indicated he would support the state in the actions they might take to remedy that. I am glad that he is supportive of that. But what if the state doesn't do anything about it? This is one of the concerns I have related to being slow and restrained in breaking shameful legacies.

I noticed that in the letter from all the mayors, they reminded us that spaces in the existing Whatcom County Jail were meant for "essential services such as medical care, as well as programs aimed at curbing recidivism" and that those "were converted to space to house the growing inmate population." How can we feel confident that, in providing a more spacious jail, we are not going to fall back on old practices like simply jailing more and more folks in it, simply because we haven't also prioritized and taken action to properly value and support our community members who can be the ones to provide empathy and effective treatments needed for health and well-being?

We have to do far better than just naming this project something different than a jail project to make the massive change needed to break the legacies of violence, displacement, migration and settlement in Whatcom County. We can't allude to services that are going to be offered and then not do all the things required to develop health care experts and a community with a trauma informed approach to deliver services, in what will only be a bigger jail that will become too small if we don't.

I call on you all to continue to dig hard to provide a needs assessment process that will identify changed practices, approaches, and facilities that will foster true health, well-being, and justice in our community.

Sincerely,
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