



**Bellingham Herald Op-Ed, submitted by County Executive Louws**

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**Planning for the Construction of a New Jail**

During its 160-year history Whatcom County has been charged by State law with the operation and maintenance of the County Jail and related correctional facilities. It's widely recognized that the existing jail requires additional capacity and improved infrastructure in order to safely incarcerate the combined volume of inmates charged by the cities as well as county inmates. Since becoming County Executive, a key priority of my administration has been to work closely with our Sheriff, Council and City leaders on finding the best solution to these capacity and infrastructure problems. Thanks to the commitment of many agencies, organizations and stakeholders, Whatcom County is actively planning the construction of a new jail along with an adjacent facility to house all Sheriff's Office operations.

The County intends to build and operate a new jail consisting of approximately 520 beds to service the needs of all jurisdictions in the community for the foreseeable future. The facility will contain desperately needed space to better house and treat inmates with mental illness who may endanger themselves or others as well as provide programming designed to reduce recidivism. Through the hard work and collaboration with the cities and many agencies, construction is anticipated to begin in February 2017. To accomplish this, several project steps are already underway to locate the new County Jail on Labounty Road in the south part of the City of Ferndale:

Prior to any building Whatcom County will be applying to the City of Ferndale for a Conditional Use Permit. The process leading to a permit will confirm the intended visual and infrastructure requirements on the site to meet the design and other important expectations of the City. Whatcom County's lead architect, the DLR Group, has been helping facilitate the permitting process. With the support of the Sheriff and other agencies working as a team the DLR Group has been reviewing the building site to determine overall opportunities and concerns on the Labounty road site. Please see this link for the [Conceptual Site Plan](#).

The site has many natural features, including a gradual elevation grade change and some wetlands. The grade change of the site will be incorporated into the design of the jail facilities to limit the visual impact to the surrounding neighbors and residences on Labounty Road. The new jail plans include avoiding and minimizing the impacts on wetlands as well as enhancing the on-site wetlands with the goal of providing an enriched habitat and connection to the surrounding plants and lands. These wetland mitigation and enhancement efforts will be reviewed by the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Department of Ecology. A key role these agencies perform is to ensure the project is taking advantage of the on-site opportunities to avoid and enhance the existing habitat effectively. These State and Federal agencies will be reviewing the project plans and permits through the summer of 2015.

Our local climate conditions are also carefully reviewed so as to determine the building forms that respond best to environmental impacts, such as the strong Northeastern wind. In this case a combination of trees and shrubs will provide the necessary wind buffer as well as an effective screening of the facilities throughout the building site. The project permits are being submitted to the City of Ferndale by the end of

January in concordance with their application process. The total project design will be reviewed by the City of Ferndale to ensure the project can meet the requirements set by the City with permit approval anticipated in March 2015.

Many elements must be considered when planning for and constructing a new jail, most important, of course, is the security of the community, our jail staff and the inmates. While the construction has critical infrastructure elements to consider there are also design choices that help to make positive and corrective impacts on the inmates. The same design elements that have been used successfully at other buildings around the country can be used to improve the work environment for our corrections deputies and other staff who spend thousands of hours inside the building. It's important to design a facility that improves the environmental conditions for all who enter the building. We all recognize that daylight offers health, mental and physiological benefits. These natural elements can have physiological and calming benefits and acoustic controls can reduce tension. These types of design elements improve the work environment for the correctional deputies and helps with inmate management, which is mutually beneficial. Efforts to create sustainable, safe, light-filled, and warm work environments for our corrections officers better equips them to do their best work.

To support the exterior of the building the design layouts reflects separate public and secure staff entrances. The public entrance is situated to the south and scaled to proper proportions, whereas, the staff entrance is scaled to fit the neighboring residential zone to the northeast. The design process will continue after Whatcom County is granted the conditional use permit and by the end of 2015 we will finalize the interior building layout. The design of the jail will progress through detailed studies of design decisions and the documentation phase. We intend to provide a full construction package for bidding by mid 2016 with construction anticipated to begin in February 2017.

Meanwhile, the County is working collaboratively with the City of Bellingham and small cities to develop a long term inter-local agreement that will guide the funding of the construction, operations and services from all the cities and jurisdictions that are using the jail facility. The inter-local agreement confirms the cities and other jurisdictions desire to continue use of the Jail for the detention of their inmates. These governments and agencies have agreed that the community and its taxpayers are best served by a cooperative, collective approach to public infrastructure, including the New Jail, through joint planning and financing. I'm pleased that these efforts help to promote economies of scale and maximize the efficiencies of your local governments.

A capitol project of this size will take a voter approved tax measure this fall to make this project a reality within the timelines identified. As Whatcom County and the cities, with the technical support of The DLR Group and bonding consultant, Public Financing Management (PFM), refine the costs and funding strategies for this facility, I will continue to be updating you with our progress in the coming months.

Please contact me or Sheriff Elfo for further information or clarification if needed.

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