

April 7, 2022

Todd Donovan, Chairman of the Whatcom County Council
Barry Buchanan, Councilmember
Tyler Byrd, Councilmember
Ben Elenbaas, Councilmember
Carol Frazey, Councilmember
Kaylee Galloway, Councilmember
Kathy Kershner, Councilmember

Greetings Honorable Councilmembers,

On behalf of Whatcom County Mayors we support the proposition that Whatcom County should replace the current correctional facility, as the current facility has more than outlived its utility. We urge the County Council to work with the Stakeholder Advisory Committee and the Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force to take the necessary steps to replace the current facility, as soon as possible.

The facility was built in 1983 and was designed to hold 148 inmates when the population of Whatcom County was approximately 110,000. By the early 2000's, when the population of Whatcom County had grown to nearly 168,000, this same facility struggled to house 312 inmates. Today, it is expected to serve an estimated population of 230,000 Whatcom County residents.

Out of necessity, multiple areas of the current facility that were originally designed to provide space for other essential services such as medical care, as well as programs aimed at curbing recidivism were converted to space to house the growing inmate population.

In 2020, the global pandemic exposed the consequences of failure to address the jail situation. Court shutdowns delayed judicial proceedings for pre-trial detainees, exacerbating the already critical overcrowding. Combined with infrastructure failures, and medical considerations related to COVID, booking restrictions became a necessary measure.

Not being able to book people for violations of criminal laws, especially for property crimes, have had predictable results. Thefts in Whatcom County have increased. Local law enforcement agencies consistently encounter incidents of criminal violations wherein officers arrest a subject for an offense, only to re-arrest the same defendant, sometimes only minutes later, for a subsequent offense at another location. The absence of any immediate consequence other than a criminal citation fosters a mindset among some that criminality is now acceptable. Even those cited, who subsequently fail to appear in court to answer the charges, learn that the only "consequence" of ignoring the summons is a warrant (which itself cannot be served due to the booking restrictions). Our constituents are deeply frustrated and disappointed that this situation continues to be left unaddressed.

To be clear, we recognize the importance of jail alternatives, understanding that incarceration is not always the most appropriate way to deal with violations of the law. Many people benefit from pre-trial diversion programs, utilizing programs such as the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) and Ground-level Response and Coordinated Engagement (GRACE) programs. We also recognize the value of other alternatives, such as electronic home monitoring, which can take pressure off our overcrowded correctional facilities. The new Crisis Stabilization Center and proposed alternative response team have expanded our capacity to meet the needs of community members in crisis.

However, it is an inescapable reality that a functional correctional facility is an essential component of any successful criminal justice system. It is imperative that this community has a correctional facility that includes the needed space to safely house offenders *and* the space to provide the needed behavioral health treatment while those individuals are housed in the facility.

When we do not have a functional correctional facility, the criminal justice system cannot function properly. Such is the situation in which we find ourselves at present in Whatcom County. We can and should do better. The time to act is now. Continued study of this known problem will not expedite the solution that we all know is needed: a new correctional facility with the medical, behavioral health and other essential space to provide the needed services.

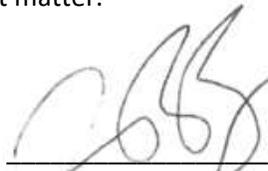
Therefore, it is imperative that the Whatcom County Council take crucial action now and take the steps necessary to replace our current correctional facility with a new facility commensurate with the full spectrum of needs of our beloved Whatcom County community.

Thank you for your consideration in this important matter.

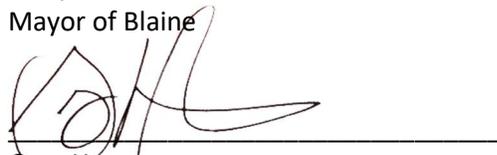
Sincerely,



Mary Lou Steward
Mayor of Blaine



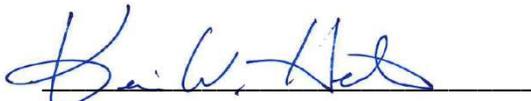
John Perry
Mayor of Everson



Greg Hansen
Mayor of Ferndale



Scott Korthuis
Mayor of Lynden



Kevin Hester
Mayor of Nooksack



Bruce Bosch
Mayor of Sumas



Seth Fleetwood
Mayor of Bellingham