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## City of Bellingham

June 26, 2023

Whatcom County Council and Whatcom County Executive Satpal Sidhu  
Whatcom County Courthouse  
311 Grand Avenue  
Bellingham, WA 98225

RE: Justice Project Implementation Plan and Sales Tax Ordinance

County leaders,

As a follow-up to the City of Bellingham's letter dated June 9, 2023, we would like to convey our continued support and appreciation for the leadership we have seen by the Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force (IPRTF) and the County's Justice Project, particularly the vision, values and recommendations embodied in the Needs Assessment Report developed by the Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC). We support a balanced approach to public safety that includes a safe and humane jail and programs and services to reduce the need or reliance on jail by addressing root causes where possible. We especially appreciate the work in the last month to strengthen the commitment to behavioral health both in the Implementation Plan and in the sales tax ordinance that the County is considering.

The Implementation Plan will serve as a defining document for the eligible uses for any voter-approved sales tax to help fund public safety and behavioral health actions in Whatcom County over the coming decade. We appreciate the range of the Implementation Plan, and the recent updates appear to be responsive to the City's requests and show improvement in several key areas. We believe the final version helps create greater transparency, a truly balanced approach, and broader public support.

In no particular order, the Implementation Plan has been updated in response to our requests in the following ways:

**Composition of the Finance and Operations Advisory Board.** We appreciate that the board composition now includes additional community voices, including those from: Tribal leadership, individuals with lived experience, community based behavioral health background, re-entry

specialist, community paramedic, youth representatives from Teen Court, a supportive housing subject matter expert and a representative from the Whatcom Racial Equity Commission. These additional voices on the board will allow for broader community input on the oversight of the funds collected and the operations of new facilities considered in the Implementation Plan.

**Greater Clarity on the Proportional Allocation of Funds.** The current version of the Implementation Plan and the proposed Ordinance provides additional clarity on the allocation of funds. It is important to the City that the ballot measure include a rough allocation scheme for spending, to not only indicate the range of eligible uses, but also the rough proportions of spending across the tax levy. The updates recognize that the projects and programs will be accomplished with many funding sources both locally and from the State depending on the program or project. We also applaud the County for committing a minimum of 50% of the ongoing County-wide sales tax to incarceration prevention and reduction services, including expansion of incarceration reduction programs, increased access to community based behavioral health, substance abuse treatment services, re-entry programs, supportive housing, diversion programs, and accountability measures that monitor progress and inform future planning. We also know that a detailed interlocal agreement will need to be reached between Whatcom County and the cities. Such an agreement is intended to coordinate and potentially combine funding from the proposed sales tax. The City of Bellingham is committed to working with the County to come to an agreement that commits to use City revenue under the proposed tax to accomplish the projects outlined in the Implementation Plan.

**Further Enhancement for Accountability and Transparency.** The continued work on oversight, accountability and transparency provides certainty for our community. Clarity around the annual reports on the progress toward the goals of the Implementation Plan will allow our community to understand how the goals have been achieved and what additional resources may be needed.

**Housing Services and Re-entry Support.** We appreciate that the Implementation Plan now includes a specific early action around a supportive housing RFP. We understand the County plans for re-entry housing to be a high priority for this RFP and appreciate that the County has integrated numerous references throughout the Implementation Plan to highlight the importance of re-entry housing as a critical services goal. The City would welcome the opportunity to be a part of a supportive housing RFP review committee.

**Workforce Shortage in Behavioral Health.** The City's insight as it relates to local government contracts as a tool to increase pay amongst behavioral health providers is now reflected in the Plan, outlining a key next step to "work with local governments to remedy inadequate pay scales for behavioral health care providers in contracts and funding awards." Additionally, we will work with the County to advocate at the state level for adequate reimbursement rates from Medicaid and private insurers, which will help providers in raising staff wages.

**Parity of Commitment to Public Health Facilities and to Incarceration Facilities.** We appreciate more detail and parity in the commitment to behavioral health facilities and to the safe and humane jail that is overdue and clearly needed. The Implementation Plan now includes

additional details on the proposed 23-hour Crisis Relief Center, which is proposed to be the first priority capitol facility built in the Implementation Plan. This facility is sorely needed to allow for first responders and law enforcement to provide needed behavioral health support for those that are in crisis and will be a diversion away from jail. Coordination with this facility and the existing Crisis Stabilization Center will provide an enhanced care transfer pathway for individuals needing longer term withdrawal management or mental health services.

We also believe there is mutual benefit for the City of Bellingham and Whatcom County towards the Implementation Plan non-jail related initial investments. The updates to the Implementation Plan and the bullet point list of anticipated early actions provide the specificity that our community requests to show investment in incarceration prevention programs and expansion of related services. The City is committed to working with the County on these items with the needed emphasis and urgency.

Thank you for considering our suggestions and proposed improvements to the Implementation Plan. The City looks forward to our continued coordination and shared investments as outlined in the Implementation Plan.

Sincerely,



Daniel Hammill  
Bellingham City Council  
President Pro Tempore and  
Ward 3 Representative



Seth Fleetwood  
Mayor, City of Bellingham

cc: Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force