

Satpal Singh Sidhu

County Executive

Barry Buchanan

Whatcom County Council

Donnell “Tank” Tanksley

Whatcom County Sheriff



To: Whatcom County Council

From: Satpal S. Sidhu, County Executive

Barry Buchanan, Council Criminal Justice & Public Safety Committee Chair

Donnell “Tank” Tanksley, Sheriff

Re: Jail Capacity Analysis & Justice Facility Project Charter

Date: June 20, 2025

Councilmembers,

On Tuesday June 24th, we will present updates to the County Council on the jail capacity analysis and project charters/communications plan. In advance of this discussion, we want to provide our shared perspective on the information and next steps.

Jail Capacity Analysis

There has been much concern and public dialogue in our community about the capacity of the new justice facility, and the ballot proposition passed without clear consensus on the right size of the jail. The County has committed that the jail will be adequately sized to avoid booking restrictions, but we also expect to experience constraints due to capital and operating budget limitations. Further, with our priority of treatment over punishment, we want to continue our commitments to diversion, rehabilitation, and reintegration, mitigating increases in jail population as our overall community population grows. As you may remember, the Justice Project Implementation Plan presented the two core capacity commitments as follows:

- Correctly sized, based on a fair analysis of population growth, along with strategic investments to avoid unnecessary incarcerations, and
- Sized and operated to ensure booking restrictions in the county and its cities will not occur.

With this in mind, we worked with STV to hire Eric Ratts from DLZ to undertake a jail capacity analysis. Mr. Ratts reviewed over 20 points of data going back over 10 years, divided by gender. Metrics include things like number and types of arrests and bookings, average daily populations, inmates released within certain time periods, inmates held over certain time periods, and recidivism rates. He also considered outstanding warrants, population growth, the impact of booking restrictions, diversion opportunities, and the acuity of medical and behavioral health issues within the jail

population. He held workshops with Sheriff's Office, law enforcement partners, facilities, and health department staff to discuss additional information and his findings.

Mr. Ratts has developed preliminary findings for the needed bed capacity in 2050, which we plan to present to the Council Tuesday. We do not expect to be able to afford to build a jail today based on 2050 needs, but we know it is prudent to understand these needs so we can plan the physical plant of the facility to accommodate possible future capacity. We have asked STV and Mr. Ratts to also project numbers for opening day and for 2040 as a next step, which will help us identify project scope needed to avoid booking restrictions over the near term and plan for future needs given current budget constraints.

We want to acknowledge that such capacity projections are based on a set of assumptions. This is not an exact science but rather a well-informed estimation based on the data available to us today. The capacity target is intended to provide direction to the Design Builder as they scope several options for the County to consider within the context of the overall budget and scope of the jail project. The options will not only consider the lever of capacity/size, but also quality, operating costs, and values (e.g. therapeutic design). As previously mentioned, capital cost and the operating budget will be a significant factor in determining overall capacity and size.

We expect the draft jail capacity report to be presented to the Finance and Facilities Advisory Board and County Council in July. This will be an opportunity for further feedback and questions, as we work toward a target number in August.

Communications Plan

We have worked with STV, staff, and key stakeholders such as the Finance and Facility Advisory Board members and IPRTF co-chairs to design a project charter that recognizes roles, communications expectations and decision-making authority. This is an appendix to a broader communications plan that outlines our commitments for how we will make sure everyone has the information they need to make decisions and the assurance that the public will be informed along the way.

On behalf of the Finance and Facility Advisory Board, we are asking for Council consideration and approval of the Project Charter and Council feedback on the communications plan. This is an important discussion and milestone, and if the Council would like additional time with the project charters at a later meeting, action can be deferred.

We look forward to continued good work together as we undertake Whatcom County's largest ever facility project and fulfill our commitments to the voters to prioritize incarceration prevention in program delivery. Please reach out to any one of us or Kayla Schott-Bresler with questions or concerns.