

**WHATCOM COUNTY
EXECUTIVE'S OFFICE**

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Satpal Singh Sidhu
County Executive

Memorandum

To: Whatcom County Council
Finance and Facility Advisory Board

Through: Satpal Sidhu, County Executive

From: Jed Holmes, Public Affairs Manager

CC: Kayla Schott-Bresler, Deputy Executive
Donnell "Tank" Tanksley, Sheriff

Date: March 31, 2026

RE: Jail Population Forecast Analysis

Background

In early 2025, Whatcom County commissioned a jail capacity study with DLZ, which was presented to the FFAB and County Council last summer. The study provided a high-level overview of the factors driving capacity need (bookings and length of stay) and projected capacity needs through 2050 based primarily on population growth expectations.

However, as the Project Team and the Design-Build Team approached their programming work to inform facility design, it became apparent that the initial jail capacity analysis did not provide sufficient information to plan for specialized housing needs.

As a result, the attached Jail Population Forecast Analysis was commissioned to fill in some of the information gaps with respect to the characteristics of the population and how that might change over time. The report was drafted by Patrick Jablonski of Pasquo Planners and was based on multiple comprehensive data extracts from the Whatcom County Jail record that included key information about every single individual charged with an offense between January 2019 and October 2025.

This data enabled the author to calculate criminal court case processing times and establish a predictor variable for lengths of stay at the jail. Additionally, statistical analyses were combined into multiple time series forecasts using Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) methods.

The primary purpose of this study was to provide our Project Team and Design-Builder with an understanding of the characteristics of the jail population and how this population may change over time.

Key Takeaways

Capacity needs. The report’s high-level results largely aligned with the 2025 capacity study, demonstrating how multiple variables impact capacity needs. The study’s “primary forecast” is that the jail would need to have the capacity to accommodate 359 people in 2030 and 514 in 2050. When adjusted for peaking and classification using a set formula, this resulted in bed counts of 422 in 2030 and 604 in 2050.

The report identifies needs across 13 different housing classifications for both male and female populations. The design build team is responsible for translating these needs into space; in many cases, design considerations may result in recommendations that do not reflect the precise numbers listed below. In sum, these numbers inform but are not direct translations of what the Design-Build team will recommend with respect to facility capacity.

		Current Pop		2030 Bed Need		2035 Bed Need		2040 Bed Need		2045 Bed Need		2050 Bed Need	
		Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Special Housing	Acute MH	12	4	15	6	16	6	18	7	20	7	21	8
	Subacute MH	28	2.5	35	3	38	4	42	4	46	5	50	5
	Special Needs	5	2.5	6	3	7	4	7	4	8	5	9	5
	Suicidal	4	1.4	5	2	5	2	6	2	7	3	7	3
	Detoxification	5	2	6	3	7	3	7	3	8	4	9	4
	Medical	11	6	14	8	15	9	16	10	18	11	20	12
	Restrictive Housing	13	7	16	10	18	11	19	12	21	13	23	14
	Protective Custody	29	2	36	3	40	3	43	3	47	4	52	4
General Population	Intake	36	7	45	10	49	11	54	12	59	13	64	14
	Minimum	69	10	86	14	94	15	103	17	112	18	123	20
	Medium	26	3	32	4	35	5	39	5	42	5	46	6
	Maximum	7	2	9	3	10	3	10	3	11	4	12	4
	Workforce	35	4	44	6	48	6	52	7	57	7	62	8
Total		280	53	349	73	381	80	417	88	456	96	499	105

Jail population turnover. The data reviewed by the author demonstrate that most people booked into the jail leave within a very short period of time (the median length of stay in 2025 was 2 days). This means that at any given period of time the number of people in the jail on low level offenses represents only a fraction of the jail population. “The short stay people churn in and out of the facility on a regular basis fairly regularly such that their numbers in the population don’t appear all that impressive,” the author notes.

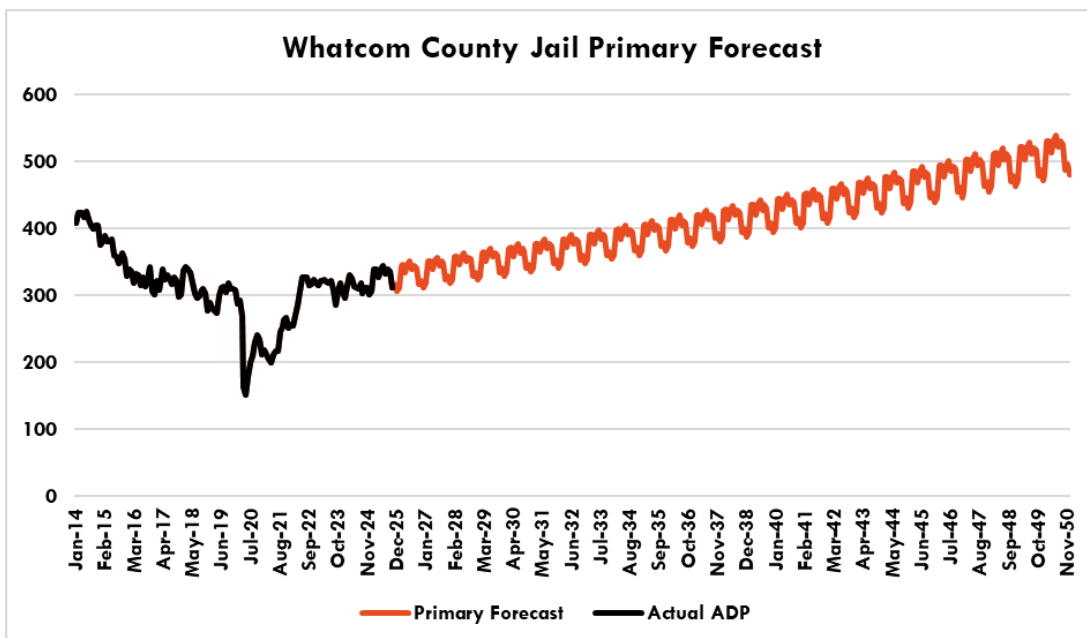
This data point is important in two respects. First, an increase in bookings of low-level offenders would likely have only a small impact on the overall jail capacity needs. Second, diversion of low-level offenders to alternatives to incarceration is similarly not likely to significantly decrease jail capacity needs.

The author concludes that “if 50% of the non-violent, non-weapons, non-probation violation misdemeanants were able to be diverted, the ADP would be reduced by approximately 16. A 70% diversion rate could reduce the ADP by approximately 22. Using the 70% diversion rate on the mental health population (itself estimated due to data shortcomings) results in a potential ADP reduction of 16 (approximately a 5% impact).” Additional analysis of diversionary potential and impacts is expected as an addendum to the forthcoming Behavioral Health Analysis (Erin Persky & Associates).

Drivers of uncertainty

The author is careful to note that the primary forecast presented is “only one potential outcome amid a myriad of possible outcomes for Whatcom County.” While there are assumptions related to holding variables constant within criminal justice policy, the author quantifies potential impacts of diversion programs for the reader (noted above). This and further analysis from EPA allows the County and Design-Build team to consider how strategic investments to avoid unnecessary incarceration, such as the Behavioral Care Center, may impact needed capacity.

The graphical representation of the projection provides a contrast between actual jail usage and projected future use, where past needs have fluctuated significantly in response societal changes and future needs are portrayed to change in a largely linear fashion.



It is important to understand the inherent uncertainties with respect to long-term forecasting and moderate expectations that these projections represent more than an educated estimation. Future needs will be similarly dynamic and fluctuate in reaction to socio-economic

drivers that are both unpredictable and beyond our control. For illustrative purposes, here are two known disruptive changes that will be seen in Whatcom County:

Adjudication. The study mentions the recent addition of a superior court judge as a factor contributing to decreasing average lengths of stay due to increased capacity to hold multiple trials simultaneously. However, when adjudication hearings begin to take up more space on the Superior Court calendar, capacity to hold criminal trials may be reduced.

Public defense caseload standards. The reduction of caseload standards has the potential impact jail capacity needs in a myriad of ways. Will public defenders be better positioned to advocate for lower lengths of stay? Will more motions result in slower response times from the PA's Office and thus longer pre-trial and trial periods?

Conclusion

The Project Team and Design-Builder will use the findings of this report to inform their programming efforts, in particular with respect to planning for specialized housing needs. For policymakers, the document provides helpful insight into the characteristics of our current jail population and suggests how that might change over the next several decades. However, as the author points out in several instances, the primary projection offers just one potential outcome out of many.

Please address any questions regarding to Jed Holmes, Public Affairs and Strategy Manager (jholmes@co.whatcom.wa.us).