

**Whatcom County
Council Criminal Justice and Public Safety Committee**

**COUNTY COURTHOUSE
311 Grand Avenue, Ste #105
Bellingham, WA 98225-4038
(360) 778-5010**



Committee Minutes - Draft Minutes

Tuesday, March 10, 2026

9:35 AM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

**HYBRID MEETING - MAY BEGIN EARLY/LATE - ADJOURNS BY 10:55 A.M.
(PARTICIPATE IN-PERSON, SEE REMOTE JOIN INSTRUCTIONS AT
www.whatcomcounty.us/joinvirtualcouncil, OR CALL 360.778.5010)**

COUNCILMEMBERS

Elizabeth Boyle
Barry Buchanan
Ben Elenbaas
Kaylee Galloway
Jessica Rienstra
Jon Scanlon
Mark Stremler

CLERK OF THE COUNCIL

Cathy Halka, AICP, CMC

Call To Order

Committee Chair Barry Buchanan called the meeting to order at 9:56 a.m. in a hybrid meeting.

Roll Call

Present: 7 - Elizabeth Boyle, Barry Buchanan, Ben Elenbaas, Kaylee Galloway, Jessica Rienstra, Jon Scanlon, and Mark Stremler

Announcements

Special Presentation

1. [AB2026-197](#) Report from District Court Probation

Jake Wiebusch, District Court Administrator, read from a presentation (on file) about District Court Probation. He spoke about what they do and some of the services they provide, probation staff and their specialized caseloads, and programs they run at no additional expense to clients to fill the gap between their core services and outside referred treatment providers. He answered whether they see programs other counties are doing to reduce and prevent incarceration that they would like Whatcom County to take on, and stated there is a significant need for mental health evaluations. He answered where Whatcom County lands as far as caseloads and stated they are a little above the national standards.

This agenda item was REPORTED.

Committee Discussion

1. [AB2026-203](#) Discussion of Justice Project finances and interlocal agreement

Jed Holmes, Executive's Office, read from a presentation (on file) about the current interlocal agreement with the cities and revenue for the Justice Project, what the sales tax is bringing in, what levers or parameters can be adjusted to potentially increase the amount of funds available for capital construction, and that conversations are underway with the City of Bellingham and the small cities to consider an update of the existing interlocal.

Kayla Schott-Bresler, Executive's Office, stated they do not need a decision until the end of April but would like the Council to provide some direction to the project team and create an interim decision point around the budget. She answered what additional information Council will get before they have to make that budgetary decision (besides a behavioral health study that will be done in the next few weeks), and stated the project team is working on

that behavioral health analysis and there will be a refined jail capacity analysis (which will help inform what types of healthcare beds are needed in the facility and other classification considerations), updated scenarios that would act as a recommendation for priorities the project team would like to see, and operational cost modeling (which depends on all the other information to inform that).

She answered if the project team is looking at ways to reduce costs of construction in materials or construction methods, and stated they are, but it is too early to determine some things without a design.

Scott Korthuis, Lynden City Mayor, was invited to speak and stated he has been working on a letter with the City of Bellingham and small cities to send to the Council about concerns the cities might have as they move forward, and criteria (including enough capacity to not have booking restrictions) they would ask for if they commit to more years. They also recognize that we need a facility that encourages diversion rather than incarceration, and part of that is the behavioral health center. They want to build a jail that is efficient and designed to minimize staff and maximize efficiency of the labor force that we have. They recognize that they will likely need to negotiate on changes to the jail use agreement. The Finance Advisory Board needs to get a number to the County first and give that to the design team. Every two months they are losing \$1.5 million in buying power so they need to keep this moving quickly. He answered if the small cities have a mechanism in mind to reinforce their ask for no booking restrictions. He stated one of the hopes is that they will get either State or Federal money to pay for the behavioral care center. Then, if additional cash is opened up, the first thing they have to commit to is capacity. He spoke about getting costs from the design team for adding beds as well.

Galloway spoke about what information she needs in order to set a budget cap, including knowing that all the cities are on board, an update to the interlocal, modest sales tax growth projections, and pending information on potential cost savings. She stated whatever they set their cap at, it needs to be within their financial means and needs to include the construction of a behavioral care center in conjunction. She stated they also need to consider demolition of the existing facility and short-term utilization of the work center to build capacity if capacity is truly needed. She spoke about figuring out the cap and then how they would spend that, and stated it is really important that they leverage and prioritize the use of other County funds to meet the commitment to services.

Councilmembers and the speakers discussed that the cities would be in favor of more beds to address capacity needs and that there will need to be compromise because of financial limitations, how they know what an adequately sized jail looks like to avoid booking restrictions and that recommendations should come through the jail capacity analysis, that the IPRTF needs to see data on how existing diversion programs are working so they can make educated decisions on which to fund to have less recidivism, that not enough detail about specialized housing in the original jail capacity analysis is what prompted the need for another one, what would be different with different numbers of beds, and the belief that without the accountability of a jail, it will not matter how much money they spend on everything else.

Korthuis answered why he believes the cities want a right-sized jail.

Buchanan stated he thinks they need to look at the work center as a temporary resource to build capacity.

Korthuis stated he is glad to hear them vocalizing to keep the work center as a possibility and he spoke about his comfort level with the number of beds in the jail, with 480 being his lowest.

Councilmembers and the speakers discussed also right-sizing behavioral care, that because of its high cost per day, it really has to work, that the maximum debt scenario brings down the dollar amount available for community-based services, if the Sheriff's Office capacity review is taking into account provision of services in the capacity analysis or if its projections are assuming our patterns just continue, that data shows that community and behavioral health services do decrease recidivism and the use of the jail, that they should use that information in deciding how much money they will put forward, the balance between accountability and giving pre-trial people due process, and whether they should seek other funding for the behavioral health side.

This agenda item was DISCUSSED.

Items Added by Revision

There were no agenda items added by revision.

Other Business

There was no other business.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 11:02 a.m.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA

Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

Barry Buchanan, Committee Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Kristi Felbinger