

**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, February 24, 2026

1 PM

Hybrid Meeting - Council Chambers

**HYBRID MEETING - ADJOURNS BY 1:30 P.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 1:10 p.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. [AB2026-095](#) Presentation from the Justice Center Owner's Representative, STV, regarding the Whatcom County Justice Project

The following people read from a presentation (on file):

- Kayla Schott-Bresler, Executive's Office
- Adam Johnson, STV

Schott-Bresler gave an update on the process and stated they are still in the validation phase where decisions relating to the size, scope, location, budget, and programming for these facilities are made. They are not yet in the design phases, so the drawings in these slides are not detailed. Their hope is to get a scope and budget by the end of April so they can start architectural design in the summer of 2026. She spoke about public engagement efforts and opportunities and stated what they really want to communicate is that this is the decision-making period, at the policy level, for these facilities. She spoke about challenges including flattening sales tax and higher construction costs, and stated many of the core commitments around this project are competing against each other for these limited resources. She stated that the number of 480 beds is a fixed starting point in order to start the discussion about the different scenarios but they are still relying on the County's experts in the Sheriff's Office and the design build team to make a final recommendation on what is appropriate for a community of our size. They are also starting to have a lot of conversations about what it means to eliminate booking restrictions, and the scenarios show that there are other drivers, besides bed count, such as configuration of housing units, diversion, and how things are happening in our court system. The number of beds is a driver of the capital construction and operational costs which both the County and the cities will incur in the future.

Johnson spoke about the four scenarios for the facility, and the differences between them.

Schott-Bresler spoke about the policy levers they would like to hear from decision-makers on over the next few months. She spoke about budget levers which include the length of contribution from the cities that they are willing to agree to, and how much money is available for community-based services. She stated there are also a number of levers related to the internal features of the jail, and they are trying to manage all of it while there are still a lot of unknowns. They need to know now what the budget target is in order to move forward, and the prioritization of spending within that cap.

Councilmembers discussed carving out more time for discussion on this topic at future meetings, finding out what they can build within their financial means and revenue capacity, retaining the cities' portion of this sales tax so they can deliver on their commitments to diversion, health care in the jail, and post-incarceration re-entry, thinking of beds in terms of what are functional beds and not just the number, the idea of revisiting and adjusting the fifty percent of sales tax revenue funding model if it accomplishes the same outcome that voters wanted, the idea of establishing care first in scenarios and then thinking about the number of beds so care is prioritized, determining what the top dollar amount is that they can spend and then working from there, going back to the jail capacity analysis and making it more detailed, learning more from the Sheriff about what booking restrictions would look like in the future and how that matches up to the interlocal agreement, what else is being looked at to drive down costs, looking for other methods to fund our behavioral health goals, that accountability is key in order to get people into the behavioral health part of it, and getting more detail on the different levels of treatment space or treatment capacity between the scenarios.

Donnell Tanksley, Sheriff, stated scenario one is a no-go and they have to do something between two and three. He spoke about having a top dollar amount to work with first and that the courts are also a key to determining what they will need in the jail.

This agenda item was PRESENTED.

Items Added by Revision

There were no agenda items added by revision.

Other Business

There was no other business.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 1:55 p.m.

ATTEST:

WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL
WHATCOM COUNTY, WA

Cathy Halka, Council Clerk

Barry Buchanan, Committee Chair

Meeting Minutes prepared by Kristi Felbinger