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## City of Bellingham

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WHATCOM COUNTY  
COUNCIL

June 9, 2023

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

County Leaders,

On behalf of the City of Bellingham, we would like to convey our support and appreciation for the leadership we have seen by the Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force (IPRTF) and the County's Justice Project, and in particular 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 and justice that includes accountability, rehabilitation, and prevention – an approach that includes both a safe and humane jail, and programs and services to reduce reliance on jail by addressing root causes where possible.

Our attention, like yours, is now directed at the draft Implementation Plan, which will serve as a defining document for the eligible uses for any voter-approved sales tax to help fund public safety and health actions in Whatcom County over the coming decade. We appreciate the range of the Implementation Plan, yet we see room for improvement in several key areas. We would like to recommend some changes to the Plan before it is finalized. We believe our suggestions will help to create greater transparency, a truly balanced approach, and broader public support. In no particular order, our concerns and suggestions are as follows:

**Composition of the Finance and Operations Advisory Board.** This Board is intended “to provide oversight of the funds collected...and to ensure fair cost sharing and public transparency.” Its primary role is fiscal oversight, and so it is entirely appropriate that the Board includes local elected officials. We notice the lack of elected Tribal leadership, however, and suggest that a seat be made for this important representation. Moreover, as proposed, the Board is heavily weighted towards non-elected law enforcement officials, but it includes only one public health official. Given that the majority of the recommendations in the Implementation Plan concern behavioral health facilities, programs, or services, we believe that additional public health and behavioral health representatives should be included on the Finance and Operations Advisory Board. We also suggest that law enforcement should be represented by fewer members – perhaps the Sheriff and one other police chief selected from the

local tribes and cities. It is hard to see why so many law enforcement representatives are needed on a fiscal accountability board. We also suggest that a position on the Board be made available for one general community member.

**Greater Clarity on the Proportional Allocation of Funds.** As a general rule, we believe it is advisable for ballot measures to 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 life of the tax levy. We have heard concerns that too much of the money will be spent on one purpose, or not enough spent on another. We recognize there are reasons why strict prescription of where funds will be spent is not prudent or possible. Certainly, there should be room for flexibility in spending from year to year, and room for shifting of emphasis as projects are developed and implemented over time. Many funding sources will be available, both locally and from the State, depending on the program or project. Moreover, an interlocal agreement will need to be reached between Whatcom County and the cities, to coordinate and potentially combine funding from the proposed sales tax. A higher level of financial detail will be developed over time. Even so, your constituents deserve as much clarity as possible before voting. A lack of clarity on this issue has the potential to create misunderstanding and to damage public support at the ballot box. We urge you to revise the Plan or the ordinance as appropriate to provide more clarity on the allocation of funds.

**Further Enhancements for Accountability and Transparency.** The draft Implementation Plan includes two oversight Boards and calls for the collection of data to measure progress toward desired outcomes. It is unclear whether any of this will take the form of periodic and regular reports to the County Council, to the advisory boards, or to the public. We believe regular reports should be produced and distributed to relevant boards and commissions, such as the IRPTF and the Whatcom Racial Equity Commission. Language to this effect should be added to the Plan. Moreover, it is important that these reports be in a form that is accessible and understandable to the general public.

**Housing Services and Re-entry Support.** The Implementation Plan includes general support for expanded supportive housing programs for people with behavioral health issues and a history of incarceration. It also includes a general call to bolster re-entry support services, and a more specific recommendation for transportation to a safe destination upon release from jail. However, housing is not identified as a specific re-entry service, when in fact it may be the most significant re-entry service needed to prevent relapse and re-incarceration. Experience has taught us that without stable housing, continuity of services is very difficult, almost impossible to maintain. The draft Plan does not identify an action step on this matter. We urge you to put greater emphasis and specific language on transitional housing as a key piece for public health and safety.

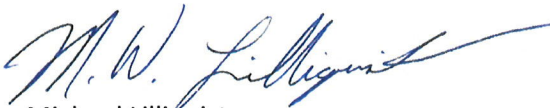
**Workforce Shortage in Behavioral Health.** Although the draft Implementation Plan states that inadequate pay is a significant contributing factor to workforce shortages and poor retention of qualified professionals, we can find no action steps in Project 4 that address the issue of pay. Our view is that

there is a role for local governments to address the pay issue, in our contracts and funding awards. We suggest that language be added that acknowledges a “next step” to address this issue. This change might be handled by revising and expanding the first bullet point under next steps for Project 4.

**Parity of Commitment to Public Health Facilities and to Incarceration Facilities.** The Implementation Plan appropriately contains a fair amount of information and conceptual plans for a new jail and associated treatment spaces, including preliminary cost and financing (bonding) scenarios. We agree that a safe and humane jail is overdue and sorely needed. But the need is equally clear and equally overdue for adequate behavioral health facilities and substance use treatment facilities. The draft Plan calls simply for “assessment” of what additional facilities might be needed. We believe that this needs much greater emphasis, urgency, and specificity. This assessment ought to be fast-tracked; and preliminary funding ideas should be included in financial scenarios and fiscal planning discussed in the Implementation Plan, on a level that is similar to that for the jail. To that end, the City of Bellingham is prepared to support increased behavioral health facilities and programming subject to new revenue from passage of the ballot measure.

Thank you for considering these suggestions and proposed improvements to the Implementation Plan.

Sincerely,



Michael Lilliquist  
President, Bellingham City Council  
And Ward 6 representative



Seth Fleetwood  
Mayor, City of Bellingham

CC: Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force