



MEMORANDUM

TO: Whatcom County Council

FROM: Kayla Schott-Bresler, Deputy Executive

THROUGH: Satpal S. Sidhu, County Executive

CC: Donnell "Tank" Tanksley, Sheriff
Steve Harris, Undersheriff

RE: Search and Rescue Funding

DATE: July 30, 2024

Background

On August 8, 2023 the County Council requested that the Administration work with Whatcom County Search and Rescue (WCSAR) on the relocation of its facility from NW Annex. The Council "earmarked" up to \$1.1M of ARPA funding toward this end. For the past year, the Executive's Office has been working with WCSAR, the Prosecuting Attorney's Office, and the Sheriff's Office on a strategy that would meet Search and Rescue's facility needs and Council's request while staying within the parameters of public funding requirements.

The mutually agreed upon recommendation is to proceed with the County leasing a privately-owned building, with a sublet to WCSAR for a period of ten years. WCSAR is in discussion with a developer in Everson who is interested in building an industrial space that could ultimately be leased by the County, subject to approval of a lease by the Whatcom County Council.

Funding

When the \$1.1M was originally set aside for this purpose, it was assumed it would be paid as an initial capital contribution rather than as a lease over time. Given the diminishing value of this funding over time, WCSAR does not believe it is feasible to lease its proposed building for this amount of funding. The nonprofit is requesting \$1.5M in funding, and additionally, would like the County to continue paying building expenses such as property taxes, utilities, etc. In WCSAR's current building these expenses are minimal; however, in a new property they could be significant and result in a new ongoing General Fund expense, if the County agreed to assume these costs.



Under WCSAR's proposed plan, there is not an expectation that the County provide any future funding for facility space beyond the initial ten years, somewhat mitigating increased initial costs. The Executive recommends including such information in a proposed MOA with WCSAR.

Whatcom County would be in a somewhat unique position amongst other counties insofar as the County would not own/provide in-kind Search and Rescue space directly.

Other Jurisdictions

The Administration and WCSAR did some research to learn what other Counties are doing for Search and Rescue facilities and produced the following information:

County	Amount	Additional Notes
Clark	County owned building	
Cowlitz	Privately funded	
Ferry	\$10,00/year lease	
Kittitas	County owned shared space	
Mason	Uses county training rooms	
Skagit	\$12,000/year lease	Port lease in exchange for Sheriff Office presence; also serves as Sheriff outpost.
Snohomish	County owned dedicated building	
Stevens	\$3,500/year lease	Also uses County meeting room
Whitman	n/a	No active search and rescue operation

Recommendation

The Administrative is comfortable increasing the ARPA allocation to \$1.5M but has concerns about an additional ongoing General Fund expense in the form of taxes or utilities.

We also want to flag for the Council that this ARPA contribution is available for general government services and should be considered similarly to the County's General Fund. Providing the \$1.5M in funding may also diminish the County's contribution to other community and internal priorities which are also ARPA eligible, such as the relocation of the Bellingham Senior Center, social service requests (e.g. food bank, recovery housing), mandatory services (e.g. jail health, public defense, adjudication, etc.)

Please contact Kayla Schott-Bresler with any questions.