

**ORDINANCE NO. 2023-\_\_\_\_\_**

**PROVIDING FOR SUBMISSION OF A PROPOSITION TO THE QUALIFIED ELECTORS OF WHATCOM COUNTY PURSUANT TO RCW 82.14.450 AUTHORIZING THE COLLECTION OF A LOCAL SALES AND USE TAX OF TWO-TENTHS OF ONE PERCENT FOR THE PURPOSE OF PROVIDING FUNDS FOR COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH PUBLIC HEALTH, SAFETY, AND JUSTICE FACILITIES AND SERVICES, INCLUDING BEHAVIORAL HEALTH, HOUSING, PUBLIC SAFETY, AND CRIMINAL JUSTICE FACILITIES AND PROGRAMS**

**WHEREAS**, Whatcom County has an opportunity to plan for a criminal legal system that is built to address the root causes of incarceration and designed with rehabilitation as the goal; and

**WHEREAS**, the [Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force \(IPRTF\)](#), established in 2015 and acting as the Law and Justice Council (LJC) for Whatcom County (as per [RCW 72.09.300](#)), reviews and makes recommendations to safely and effectively reduce incarceration of individuals struggling with mental health and substance use disorders and minimize jail utilization by pre-trial defendants who can safely be released; and

**WHEREAS**, the IPRTF's [Phase One Report](#) identified challenges with current systems and services, including the need for expansion of the crisis triage facility, jail diversion programs, and behavioral health programs to reduce jail use by people with mental health and substance use disorders; and

**WHEREAS**, on August 7, 2019, the Whatcom County Council approved [Resolution 2019-036](#), adopting a statement of public health, safety, and justice facility planning principles for Whatcom County; and

**WHEREAS**, Resolution 2019-036 identified the need to strive for conditions where the cycle of incarceration is broken rather than perpetuated, with continued support and focus on mental health and substance use disorder treatment and diversion rather than incarceration; and

**WHEREAS**, Resolution 2019-036 identified "the following are inextricably linked: responsible stewardship of public funds, ensuring public safety, and providing adequate countywide behavioral health services"; and

**WHEREAS**, Resolution 2019-036 established a workplan to develop a public health, safety, and justice facility needs assessment (Justice Project) and prioritize community engagement to guide its development; and

**WHEREAS**, Resolution 2019-036 recognized that there are multiple deficiencies with the downtown public safety (jail) facility that include life-safety issues and that the cost of addressing the most significant issues are too high to continue into the future and the need for an

appropriately sized replacement facility continues to be the most burdensome and needed capital issue that Whatcom County faces; and

**WHEREAS**, Resolution 2019-036 recognized the need to create a funding proposal to address the Justice Project needs assessment, provide a safer, more secure, and healthier environment for those who work, visit, and are incarcerated within the public safety/justice facility, identifying the goal of a future ballot measure; and

**WHEREAS**, on December 3, 2019, the Whatcom County Council established a Stakeholder Advisory Committee (SAC) to guide the development of a public health, safety, and justice facility needs assessment (as amended, see [Resolution No. 2022-021](#)); and

**WHEREAS**, the development of a public health, safety, and justice facility needs assessment (Justice Project) was paused in early 2020, due to the COVID-19 public health emergency and restarted in early 2022;

**WHEREAS**, on January 2021, the [Anne Deacon Center for Hope \(Crisis Stabilization Center\)](#) opened to provide short-term, in-patient substance use disorder and behavioral health support services, offering 32 beds and doubling the capacity of the triage center it replaced; and

**WHEREAS**, the SAC held its first meeting on January 20, 2022 and, over the course of a year, the SAC held [10 meetings and additional group discussions](#) to review data, identify gaps in the current community response, and consider what it would take to fill gaps to improve health and public safety; and

**WHEREAS**, the IPRTF, acting as the LJC, provided support, expertise, and assistance to the SAC throughout its efforts to create the Justice Project Needs Assessment Report; and

**WHEREAS**, the development of the SAC's Justice Project Needs Assessment sought community feedback through a variety of methods, including:

- A town hall listening session on November 15, 2022,
- A public online [survey](#) with over 1,700 respondents,
- A survey of incarcerated individuals and staff at the Whatcom County jail with 109 respondents,
- [Listening sessions](#) (6) with priority audiences, including people with lived experience in the criminal legal system, tribal members, and immigrants, and
- Informal interviews (8) with immigrant community leaders and Lummi Nation elders; and

**WHEREAS**, on January 26, 2023, the SAC approved the [Justice Project Needs Assessment Report](#), which

- Establishes a vision, values, and goals, for the criminal legal system in Whatcom County,
- Examines data related to incarceration rates,
- Identifies gaps in the current community response to health and public safety needs, both inside and outside Whatcom County's jail facilities,
- Considers what it would take to fill those gaps in order to improve health and public safety, and
- Makes recommendations to address the community's public health, safety, and justice concerns; and

**WHEREAS**, the Needs Assessment focuses on three elements of public health, safety, and justice systems that are interrelated:

- Systems, which includes shifts in practices, policies, and funding that facilitate efficient functioning of the criminal legal system, and reduce incarceration and the duration of incarceration,
- Services, which are the supports that need to be in place for people to prevent and reduce involvement in the criminal legal system, and
- Facilities, which include a jail and a variety of residential and non-residential facilities and settings for legal and healthcare treatment and services; and

**WHEREAS**, the Needs Assessment recognizes two-long standing community needs:

- To more appropriately respond to lower-level offenses through the provision of incarceration, prevention, diversion, and alternative services, including reducing the number of people who are incarcerated and have behavioral health issues,
- To have a safe and humane jail that is safe for those in it, with sufficient services needed to support successful community reentry; and

**WHEREAS**, the Needs Assessment report identifies more specific challenges in Whatcom County's criminal legal system, including:

- Inconsistency in data collection systems and limited publicly available information,
- Insufficient access to mental health and substance use disorder treatment (in-patient and out-patient),
- Limited capacity in effective diversion programs,
- Inadequate jail capacity to meet the needs of incarcerated people with regards to everything from the most basic functions, such as laundry, kitchen, and dining facilities, to enough confidential spaces to receive behavioral and physical healthcare, meet with attorneys, or attend support groups,
- Insufficient affordable housing and permanent supportive housing,
- Inadequate discharge planning,
- Significant delays in competency restoration services due to the Washington State Department of Social and Human Services' failure to meet constitutional obligations for competency evaluation and restoration services; and

**WHEREAS**, the Needs Assessment Report identifies needs and recommendations along a continuum, including prevention and diversion, jail-based, re-entry, and post-incarceration; and

**WHEREAS**, on February 21, 2023, the Whatcom County Council approved [Resolution 2023-006](#), accepting the SAC's Justice Project Needs Assessment Report and identifying the next steps to create a Justice Project Implementation Plan that includes:

- Analysis of potential facilities concepts, including location options and planning level costs,
- Identification of a site and concept for the main jail and service facilities in the community,
- Proposed services and systems efforts and their costs,
- Identification of county departments, community leaders and organizations to lead implementation of the recommendations, and
- A funding approach, including but not limited to elements to be funded through a proposed ballot measure; and

**WHEREAS**, Resolution 2023-006 identifies that the County Executive shall work with the IPRTF/LJC to develop an Implementation Plan with feedback from priority audiences and the general public; and

**WHEREAS**, the IPRTF/LJC conducted five workshops to develop a list of project ideas in responding to the recommendations of the Justice Project Needs Assessment; and

**WHEREAS**, in Spring 2023, seven (7) focus groups and an additional twenty (20) surveys provided feedback from priority audiences including people with lived experience in the criminal justice system, Lummi Nation members, BIPOC individuals, and Latinx/Hispanic individuals; and

**WHEREAS**, the Justice Project Needs Assessment Implementation Plan (incorporated herein as Exhibit A) includes fifteen specific action items in the following five categories:

- Increase access to behavioral health services by
  - Increasing the capacity of effective existing programs to divert people from incarceration,
  - Building systems to facilitate communication and coordination between organizations, and
  - Addressing workforce shortages in behavioral health services
- Expand the capacity of programs to reduce incarceration/re-incarceration by
  - Ensuring people leaving jail have transportation to a safe destination,
  - Bolstering re-entry support services, and
  - Ensuring ongoing efforts to maintain and expand supportive housing programs include services for people with behavioral health issues and a history of incarceration
- Build the array of facilities needed to promote public health and safety by
  - Building a 23-hour crisis relief center,
  - Building a safe and humane jail, coordinating with a behavioral care center, and
  - Researching the feasibility of building additional facilities for voluntary and involuntary treatment of people with serious mental illness and/or substance use disorders
- Make systems changes with local, regional, and state partners by
  - Continuing to make changes in court systems,
  - Advocating for a state waiver to allow the use of Medicaid funds to pay for jail-based medical and behavioral health services, and
  - Expediting access to competency restoration services
- Measure and share progress for accountability and transparency, and plan for the future by
  - Collecting data to measure progress toward desired outcomes,
  - Developing a data dashboard, and
  - Including BIPOC communities and people with lived experience in the oversight of progress and future planning efforts

**WHEREAS**, on June 12, 2023, the IPRTF/LJC approved the Justice Project Implementation Plan and recommended the plan the Whatcom County Council; and

**WHEREAS**, Whatcom County is committed to promoting community safety, health, and justice, and aims to reduce crime and incarceration through early interventions and long-term investments in people and programs that support prevention, restoration, and accountability; and

**WHEREAS**, Whatcom County currently invests considerably in diversion, housing, and behavioral health services for individuals at high risk of incarceration, including but not limited to the establishment and ongoing funding of Mental Health Court, Recovery Court, the Ground-Level Response & Coordinated Engagement Program (GRACE), the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) Program, the Alternative Response Team (ART), transportation services for vulnerable individuals, behavioral health Sheriff deputies and co-responder programs, the City Gate Re-Entry Housing Program, and the Sun House mental health shelter program; and

**WHEREAS**, significant additional investment is needed to uphold the County's commitment to promoting community safety, health, and justice; and

**WHEREAS**, the Whatcom County Executive has prepared an administrative plan and budget for initial investments in Justice Project Implementation Plan projects, including a recommendation on leveraging other local, state, and federal funding sources; and

**WHEREAS**, to accomplish this plan, the County Council will need to make significant investments from local funds, including but not limited to the proposed public health, safety, and justice sales and use tax and the County's existing general fund, behavioral health fund, and housing funds; and

**WHEREAS**, RCW 82.14.450 authorizes counties and cities to submit an authorizing proposition to the voters in order to impose a sales and use tax for criminal justice and other purposes; and

**WHEREAS**, at least one third of moneys collected under the authorized sales and use tax must be used for criminal justice purposes, fire protection purposes, or both; and

**WHEREAS**, RCW 82.14.450 defines "criminal justice purposes" as provided in RCW 82.14.340, "Such criminal justice purposes of mutual benefit include, but are not limited to, the construction, improvement, and expansion of jails, court facilities, juvenile justice facilities, and services with ancillary benefits to the civil justice system,"; and

**WHEREAS**, money received by a county under RCW 82.14.450 must be shared between the county and the cities as follows: 60 percent must be retained by the county and 40 percent must be distributed on a per capita basis to cities in the county; and

**WHEREAS**, Whatcom County and cities within Whatcom County have a shared interest in the criminal justice system as well as revenue collected under RCW 82.14.450, and therefore require a structure for collaboration on an ongoing basis; and

**WHEREAS**, in order to provide funding for costs associated with financing, design, construction, maintenance, and operations of public health, safety, and justice facilities and services, it is deemed necessary and advisable for Whatcom County to submit a ballot proposition to the

voters for authorization to impose an additional local sales and use tax of two-tenths of one percent (0.002 or 20 cents per \$100), as authorized by RCW 82.14.450; and

**WHEREAS**, following passage of a voter-approved proposition for a sales and use tax, the County intends to issue general obligation bonds for the planning, design and construction costs of the facilities identified in the Justice Project Implementation Plan; and

**WHEREAS**, the life of the bonds of the behavioral health and correctional facilities may be no more than 30 years, and may expire on or around December 31, 2055. Once the total capital financing costs of the behavioral health and correctional facilities have been paid for, the County Council shall consider, at that time, the repeal of one-half of the two-tenths of one percent sales and use tax.

**NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT ORDAINED by the Whatcom County Council that:**

**SECTION 1 – AUTHORIZATION OF SALES AND USE TAX:** a ballot proposition shall be submitted to the qualified electors of Whatcom County pursuant to RCW 82.14.450 to authorize the County Council to fix and impose a local sales and use tax of two-tenths of one percent (0.002 or 20 cents for every \$100) to provide funding for public health, safety, and justice facilities and services, including behavioral health, housing, diversion, and correctional facilities and programs.

**SECTION 2 – DEPOSIT OF PROCEEDS:** If the Proposition is approved, all of the County's portion of the proceeds will be deposited into the New Health, Safety & Justice Fund.

**SECTION 3 – SALES AND USE TAX PURPOSE:** The Sales and Use Tax shall provide funds for costs associated with public health, safety, and justice facilities and services, including behavioral health, housing, diversion and correctional facilities and programs.

The primary purpose of initial expenditures of the proceeds shall be to construct correctional and behavioral health facilities needed to promote public health and safety. Proceeds shall also support expansion of the incarceration reduction programs, access to behavioral health services and accountability measures to monitor progress and inform future planning.

**SECTION 4 - ELIGIBLE EXPENDITURES:** The Whatcom County Council hereby adopts the Justice Project Implementation Plan (Exhibit A). Funds collected under this sales and use tax may be used for any expense consistent with the Implementation Plan, as adopted or as may be amended consistent with Section 7, or future implementation plans adopted by the Whatcom County Council.

Cities within Whatcom County with a 2023 population less than 20,000 people may use proceeds from this Sales and Use Tax for any public health, safety, and justice purpose, including but not limited to municipal public safety expenditures, and which use shall not be limited or restricted by the provisions and guidance of the Implementation Plan.

**SECTION 5 – INTERJURISDICTIONAL AND STAKEHOLDER COORDINATION:**

If the sales and use tax is approved by the voters:

1. The Whatcom County Council directs the Whatcom County Executive to work with all Whatcom County cities to enter into a long-term agreement no later than June 1, 2024 which

shall govern the distribution of sales and use tax revenue collected. The agreement shall acknowledge that all tax proceeds will be used for mutually beneficial public health, safety, and justice facilities and services. The Executive shall work toward an agreement that provides adequate funding to accomplish the construction of a new justice facility and maximizes the remainder of sales and use tax proceeds for investments in behavioral health, housing, re-entry, and diversion facilities and services consistent with the Implementation Plan. The agreement shall also include a fair and equitable sharing of revenue that prioritizes the bonding for the construction costs of the jail and behavioral health facilities and recognizes the County and cities' goal to allow the public safety tax allocation to be consistent with RCW 82.14.450(6) as soon as reasonably possible.

2. The Whatcom County Council directs the Whatcom County Executive to include in the long-term agreement with the Whatcom County cities the development of a Finance and Operations Advisory Board, which shall provide financial oversight of the funds collected from this sales and use tax and make recommendations on the finance and operations of the behavioral health, housing, and correctional facilities and services. The Finance and Operations Advisory Board shall consist of the Whatcom County Executive, one Whatcom County Councilmember, the Whatcom County Sheriff, the Mayor of Bellingham, one Bellingham City Councilmember, the Bellingham Chief of Police, two elected representatives from the remaining cities within Whatcom County, one law enforcement representative from the remaining cities within Whatcom County, and the chairs of the IPRTF/LJC who shall be non-voting. Meetings of the Board shall be subject to the Open Public Meetings Act.
3. The IPRTF/LJC shall advise the County and cities on policy matters related to law and justice. The IPRTF/LJC shall coordinate with the Finance and Operations Advisory Board to monitor the progress of the Implementation Plan and for the development of subsequent implementation plans.
4. The Whatcom County Council directs the IPRTF/LJC to evaluate representation of BIPOC communities and people with criminal justice lived experience in its membership and to update membership, as needed, to ensure adequate representation. The IPRTF/LJC shall further consult BIPOC communities and people with criminal justice lived experience in the progress of the Implementation Pan and future planning efforts. Further, the Whatcom County Executive should consult with the Whatcom Racial Equity Commission on progress and planning efforts, particularly as it relates to data gathered on racially disparate impacts in the Whatcom County criminal justice system.

**SECTION 6 – AUTHORITY TO BOND:** If approved, the County may issue general obligation bonds to finance planning, design and construction of correctional, behavioral health, and housing facilities.

**SECTION 7 –SUBSEQUENT IMPLEMENTATION PLANS AND IMPLEMENTATION PLAN AMENDMENTS:**

1. No less than every seven years, the Whatcom County Executive shall coordinate with the IPRTF/LJC and Finance and Operations Advisory Board to update the Justice Project Implementation Plan and transmit the Plan to the Whatcom County Council for approval.

2. Subsequent implementation plans must be consistent with Section 2 – Sales and Use Tax Purpose and shall not impede the County’s ability to pay debt service on facility bonds issued against this tax.
3. This language is not intended to limit the Whatcom County Council’s authority to amend the Implementation Plan through ordinance at any time.

**SECTION 8 – OVERSIGHT:**

1. During the first two (2) years of tax collections, the Whatcom County Executive, the Finance and Operations Advisory Board, and the IPRTF/LJC shall jointly report bi-annually to the Whatcom County Council on the progress toward implementation and the financial performance of the New Health, Safety, and Justice Fund.
2. Thereafter, the Board and Task Force shall report no less than annually to the Whatcom County Council on progress toward goals under subsequent implementation plans.

**SECTION 9 – BALLOT PROPOSITION SUBMITTAL:** The County Auditor shall cause notice of the proposed proposition to be published in accordance with the state constitution and general law and shall submit to the qualified electors of the County the proposition hereinafter set forth on the ballot of the county-wide general election to be held on November 7, 2023. The Clerk of the Council shall certify that proposition to the County Auditor in substantially the following form:

WHATCOM COUNTY, WASHINGTON

PROPOSITION NUMBER 2023-\_\_\_\_\_

PUBLIC HEALTH, SAFETY, AND JUSTICE SALES AND USE TAX

The Whatcom County Council passed Ordinance No. \_\_\_\_\_ concerning funding for public health, safety, and justice facilities and services. If approved, this proposition would authorize a sales and use tax of two-tenths of one percent (20 cents per \$100) for costs associated with behavioral health, housing, public safety, and criminal justice facilities and services, as authorized by RCW 82.14.450. Should this proposition be approved?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes

\_\_\_\_\_ No

**SECTION 10 – CORRECTIONS AND EXPLANATORY STATEMENT:** The Prosecuting Attorney is authorized to make such minor adjustments to the wording of this proposition as may be required that do not change its substantive meaning and are consistent with the intent of this ordinance, and the Prosecuting Attorney shall prepare an explanatory statement based on this ordinance for use in the Voters Pamphlet;

**SECTION 11 – SEVERABILITY:** If any provision of this ordinance or its application to any person or circumstance is determined to be invalid, the remainder of the ordinance or its application to other persons or circumstances shall not be affected.

ADOPTED this \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 2023.

**ATTEST:**

**WHATCOM COUNTY COUNCIL  
WHATCOM COUNTY, WASHINGTON**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dana Brown-Davis,  
Clerk of the Council

\_\_\_\_\_  
Barry Buchanan,  
Council Chair

**APPROVED AS TO FORM:**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Chief Civil Deputy Prosecutor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Satpal Sidhu, County Executive

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

DRAFT