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< [Back to Regular Story Page](#)

County jail plan leaves questions unanswered

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As a long-time Hilltop resident and a strong supporter of public safety, I am concerned about the problems facing the Pierce County Jail (TNT, 11-19).

Since those problems directly affect nearby neighborhoods, we need more detail about the plan for the jail and how it will be implemented.

Here is a summary of the sheriff's seven-point plan:

- Reduce the number of lesser offenders being held.
- Reduce pretrial delays, working with the judges and courts.
- Reduce the number of offenders being released early by the Department of Corrections.
- Develop local alternatives to incarceration.
- Convert current dorm space in the jail to "hard" space.
- Open all parts of the "new" jail.
- Consider building an additional jail for more capacity.

Here are some questions that need answers:

What mistakes were made in planning and funding the new jail, and how can we avoid making them again in the future?

The new jail was planned in the 1990s, after the federal court order regarding the maximum number of prisoners. The jail was designed assuming that most of the prisoners would be low or moderate risk, yet the current jail population is more than 80 percent felony offenders.

The new jail was sited in the Hilltop despite the neighborhood's disproportionate amount of criminal activity at that time. The new jail was authorized by the Pierce County Council even though the operating costs were not fully covered. Why were these assumptions and decisions made?

My purpose is not to point fingers, but to learn from experience. How will our current county officials learn from these mistakes, especially since they were not directly involved in these decisions?

How will the sheriff's seven-point plan be implemented?

My concern with the plan as presented is that it is too general, lacks clear data describing the problems, lacks accountability assignments and does not specify what results can be expected and by when.

What hard data do we have about the problems?

What percentage of the problem is due to lesser offenders and delays in court trials? How much of the problem can be solved through day reporting and work crews? Do these alternatives already exist, or do they need to be developed? Do we

understand the problems well enough yet to know what action to take?

For each plan item, who takes the lead?

Who should be held accountable for accomplishing each objective?

For those items that the sheriff and County Council do not control (for example, pretrial delays, which is the primary responsibility of the court system; or early release of state inmates, which is the responsibility of the DOC), who will hold the court system or the DOC accountable for doing their part?

Are the “leads” committed to taking action, and are they committed to working together to understand and solve the problems?

This is a systemwide problem and will require system-level cooperation and collaboration. Are the sheriff, County Council, judges, DOC and others ready to work together effectively? Will these all of these commitments be made publicly so that the accountability is clear?

What specific steps will be taken to implement the seven plan actions?

What can we expect to see happen in 2008? Will these plans be made public so that the accountability is clear?

What intermediate and long-term results can we expect to see as a result of implementing the plan?

We need to be able to see results. For example, how many less-serious offenders will be released or not jailed? What changes in trial procedures will be implemented to reduce pretrial delays? What changes will the DOC make in its release policies? How much will that reduce the flow of returning felons to Pierce County?

How many offenders will be sent to day reporting or work crews? What impact will each of these changes have on the jail population by March 2008? June 2008? The end of 2008? Will these alternatives provide sufficient accountability for offenders, or will public safety be compromised?

What internal jail policies are contributing to the problem now?

What are the jail’s policies on releasing prisoners? Under what circumstances are prisoners released? Where do they go? What happens when large numbers of prisoners are released at the same time? What happens when the jail refuses to take a prisoner or just “books and releases”?

What steps does the jail take to minimize the impact on nearby neighborhoods?

Any discussion of building another jail must acknowledge and learn from the mistakes made previously.

Two thoughts here: Do not even think about locating it in the Hilltop. And if county officials are open and transparent about the plan as outlined above, they may well find that taxpayers are willing to provide additional support.

Work must be done on short-term and intermediate solutions now; the current negative impacts on the Tacoma Avenue and Hilltop neighborhoods are unacceptable.

Just as Pierce County has taken a disproportionate number of returning offenders due to the DOC’s poorly designed policies, the Hilltop and Tacoma Avenue areas absorb a hugely disproportionate impact from problems at the jail.

It is past time for county policymakers to address this geographic disproportionality. And it is past time for a detailed action plan that has clear data about the problems, specific action items, clear assignments of accountability and measures that allow all of us to see if the plan is actually working.

Sally Perkins, a member of the Hilltop Action Coalition, has long been active in community-betterment activities.

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