

Seattle Municipal Jail

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why do we even need a jail for misdemeanors? Far too many Americans are locked up.

The City has [cut the number of people jailed for misdemeanors](#) by 38% in the past 10 years. It is working to continue to reduce the number of people who must spend time in jail for misdemeanor offenses. However, state law requires that some offenders, such as people with a history of driving while impaired, be jailed. The law also mandates booking and jail time for anyone charged with domestic violence. Public safety demands that the City lock up some people to remove a threat to others. In addition, one-third of the people booked in jail were previously diverted or released from jail – but then failed to come back to court, resulting in arrest and a new jail booking.

2. Why not partner with the other cities in the county? I heard that Renton, Kent and Federal Way are building a jail. Why not just do a deal with them?

To meet their needs over the next 20 years, the South County cities estimate that they need to build a jail with approximately [800 beds](#) (almost double what Seattle needs). It would be difficult to find a site large enough to house both Seattle and South County inmates. It would also be difficult to find a site that's geographically convenient for all the cities. We are still meeting with cities from northern and eastern King County about building a jail together. Those cities believe they only need about 200 beds over the next 20 years.

3. A new jail would have to cost a lot of money. How will the City pay for it?

We don't know yet what a new jail would cost. Before we can estimate its costs, the City must choose a site and create a design. The City of Seattle has the ability to sell bonds to pay for building a new jail and to pay off those bonds from existing revenues.

4. Isn't it expensive to run a jail? How is the City going to pay for it? Will the City need to raise taxes?

We already pay to house our inmates at the King and Yakima county jails, so we don't expect a big change in operating costs. Jail operations would be paid from existing City tax revenues. In terms of the employees that would be needed at the municipal jail, we have yet to decide if the City would hire those workers directly or contract with the County to provide the corrections employees.

5. Jails attract unseemly characters. How can you justify putting one in the middle of a neighborhood? People will be afraid to go outside.

The City assumes responsibility for keeping our communities safe. When looking for potential sites, we limited the search to those zoned for industrial and heavy commercial or retail uses. When most people think of jails, they conjure up images of hardened criminals. That's not a true picture, though, of the [City's misdemeanor population](#). The typical inmate is a 37-year-old man who is

awaiting trial for a non-violent offense who spends an average of 10 days in jail. The vast majority has no other charges pending against them anywhere.

A [U.S. Department of Justice study](#) examined seven different jail sites in four states and found that there weren't any significant differences in crime rates between neighborhoods with jails and comparable neighborhoods without jails (and in some cases, the crime rates were lower). Regardless of where the municipal jail is ultimately built, Seattle is committed to building a well designed facility that will be a good neighbor.

6. What's the new jail going to look like?

We don't know yet. We can't begin to design it until we've chosen a site.

7. Why does the City need a 7+ acre site? Why not do a high-rise downtown?

Land acquisition, construction costs and operating costs vary by design with the low-rise vs. high-rise options. Based on its research and analysis, Seattle believes a low-rise jail is safer for staff and inmates and will cost less to build and operate. Seattle has hired a consultant to help it evaluate these assumptions. The City expects to have this information by July 2008.

A low-rise facility needs at least a 7-acre site. The [study by Ricci Greene Associates](#) estimated a low-rise building would be 188,000 square feet. This translates to roughly 4 acres. You then need to allow for parking, setback requirements, buffers, circulation (i.e., allowing vehicles to drive to/around the site), and drainage. These additional components require about 70 percent more space, which takes us to the 7 acre requirement. These are preliminary estimates and will be refined as the project moves forward.

8. Will the City continue to use the Yakima jail?

The City's current contract with Yakima County ends in 2010, and the City may negotiate an extension through 2012. We've been satisfied with our use of the Yakima jail to handle some of our inmates, but it is clearly not a long-term solution to our jail needs. It is too early to say what will happen beyond 2010.

9. Who are you talking to in the communities? We've heard you've been interviewing people. How is that going and what are you hearing?

We interviewed 50 community leaders to seek their opinions and input on the building of a new jail. These individuals represent groups ranging from neighborhood councils to broad-based community interest groups. These discussions have been very worthwhile and have given us many good ideas. Many of the issues raised are reflected in this question and answer document and will continue to help guide us through this process. A [report regarding the interviews](#) has been posted on the municipal jail Web site: <http://www.seattle.gov/municipaljail/>

10. Why doesn't Seattle build the jail outside the city limits?

We are participating in a [feasibility study](#) with the cities from northern and eastern King County to evaluate the tradeoffs in building a single misdemeanor jail vs. two jails. All of the cities participating in the feasibility study have been asked to identify possible sites. If the cities do decide to partner together to build a single misdemeanor jail, they will need to go through a siting process to decide where it should be located.

11. What is the environmental impact going to be of a big building project like this?

One of the reasons it takes so long to build a new jail, or any other big public works project, is that large projects must undergo many environmental reviews and safeguards, including the official State Environmental Protection Act (SEPA) and the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process. Until that process is final and we select a site and design the building, it is impossible to say what impacts there might be.

12. Why don't we just change drug laws and policy instead?

The City must plan how it will house misdemeanor offenders based on what the law is today, not what it might be. Laws relating to drug use are largely dictated by state law, which limits the City's options. Besides, even if we were to stop jailing people charged with misdemeanor drug offenses, it would only reduce the City's jail population by less than 3 percent. Drug possession and drug dealing are felony offenses and are handled by King County; the City files very few misdemeanor drug cases.

13. How will neighborhoods get to have a say in the selection of a site?

Part of what we're doing right now is getting input from neighborhood groups so that we can better know their concerns and needs. The public will have many opportunities to provide feedback, ranging from public forums to sending comments via the [City's municipal jail Web site](#). Ultimately, the City Council will hold hearings where neighborhood groups and others can voice their views. It is important to recognize, though, that the City must build a jail somewhere. We have no choice on that question. Our challenge is to find the best location and to do what we can to lessen any impacts it might have. Regardless of where the municipal jail is ultimately built, Seattle is committed to building a well designed facility that will be a good neighbor.

14. How big a jail will the City need to build?

On any given day, there are about 300 individuals from the City either charged with or convicted of misdemeanor crimes in the King County jail. [An independent study](#) found that to account for growth, but also considering greater use of alternatives to jail, there will be an average of 383 inmates by the year 2026. The number of jail beds needed to house these inmates is higher by 15% to allow for peaking factors (e.g., weekends and summer months have higher numbers; weekdays and winter months less). The City expects to build a municipal jail with [445 beds](#). By comparison, the King County Jail in downtown Seattle has a capacity of 1,697 inmates.

15. Does this affect juveniles at all?

No. This affects the adult misdemeanor population only. King County continues to house juvenile detainees at its Youth Service Center.

16. What about escapes? How is the City going to protect the neighborhood from escapees?

Escapes from jail are extremely rare. No one serves more than a year and the average misdemeanor inmate is in jail for only a few days. In fact, there have been no escapes from either of the King County jail facilities in the last 10 years.

17. What's going to happen when inmates are released at all hours of the day and night?

Current practice is to release people who have completed their sentences at 8 a.m., though the law requires inmates who post bail must be released at that time of posting. The City is looking at ways to safeguard the area around a jail, including services and transportation for released inmates, as well as other ways to ensure public safety. Because the City will own the facility, it will be able to set release policies.

18. What exactly will happen at the jail site? Will there be court rooms? Offices for attorneys? Video arraignment?

The City will design the jail after it chooses a site. It's too early to say exactly what will be there, although we can say that it will be able to house 445 inmates and provide meeting rooms for attorneys and the inmates they represent. There will be opportunities for community input during the entire process.

19. Is the City considering co-locating a police station with the jail? Or adding a police station? If a jail needs to be nearby, it would help if there was increased police presence.

Siting a police station is a separate process from finding a location for the municipal jail. Typically police presence increases in the vicinity of a jail whether police stations are added or not.

20. How is the City going to deal with the dramatic increase in car trips if a jail is built outside of downtown? It seems like it's bad for the environment, takes officers off the streets, and poses a safety risk to the community where the jail is located.

The City will explore transportation issues as it drafts an Environmental Impact Statement that is part of the formal SEPA process. Public meetings focused specifically on SEPA issues, such as transportation, will be held in August 2008. A stand-alone jail doesn't have as much traffic as a justice center that houses courts, such as the one in Kent. A stand-alone jail typically has police transporting prisoners, attorney and family visits. Specific traffic issues will be addressed as the facility is designed and an operational plan is developed.

21. Isn't there any way to work with the County to preserve the status quo and have them handle misdemeanants as well as felons?

King County is estimating it will be out of space to house its own felony population by 2015. The only way the County could accommodate city misdemeanants would be to build additional jail beds somewhere. Recent public statements by various County officials have sent the message that King County may be willing to re-engage with cities for a regional solution. The City remains open to this possibility. At the same time, the current contract language, which provides no jail beds beginning in 2013, forces us to move forward with our current planning efforts. The City cannot assume that the County processes will result in a regional solution; and we cannot be faced with the prospect of having nowhere to house misdemeanants in 2013. Even if a regional solution is found, someone will still have to build a new jail(s) somewhere in King County (and possibly in Seattle).

22. How can the City have narrowed down to the four sites without considering how close they are to schools, parks, and residences? How did the City get from 35 sites to 11 to four?

We are considering many [factors](#) in the process of deciding on a site. We need to identify sites both big enough and shaped in a way that would accommodate a jail. Before a final choice is made, we will consider additional factors, including proximity to residences, parks, and schools, as well as other environmental impacts. It is not possible to completely isolate a jail in a city as densely populated as Seattle. As this [map](#) shows, it is difficult to find a location within the city that is not within a mile of a school. We welcome input from the neighborhoods on all of the siting factors we are considering.

23. Can the City use eminent domain to take land?

That is an option; however, the City prefers not to use eminent domain if at all possible.

24. How can the City be considering sites that are within a mile of schools?

Almost the entire city is within [a mile of a school](#). We are considering proximity to schools and parks, and looking at distance, as well as access and geographic barriers. We are committed to building a safe municipal jail that will be a good neighbor.

25. How does the jail fit in to existing neighborhood plans, action agendas, or urban village designations?

No neighborhood considered a new jail when designing its plan. When a final site is selected, we will work with the community on how a new municipal jail might affect its plan.

26. When is the decision going to be made?

We are early in a [long process](#) that will include opportunities for public comment and environmental review. The City Council is expected to make the final decision on a site early in 2009.

27. Is the City considering the impact this will have on property values and the tax base?

Studies have found that new jails in other cities across the country have had little impact on property values throughout the neighborhood nearest to the jail. A [study by the Department of Justice](#) looked at seven communities in four different states that had jails and compared them to comparable communities that did not have jails. The study found that sales prices for residential property did not significantly differ between the communities with jails and the communities without jails. The study also found that crime rates were either comparable or lower in communities that had a jail.

28. Once you build it, what keeps you from expanding it, or using it to house overflow for more dangerous felons?

By state law, the County remains responsible for housing felony suspects and offenders. The City would not have any responsibility for housing felons in its municipal jail. We anticipate that a 445-bed jail built on a seven- to 10-acre site will be adequate to meet the City's misdemeanor needs at least through 2025.

29. Will alternate sentencing programs be based at the jail, so that people doing day reporting would come to the neighborhood as well?

There are no plans to shift day reporting and other programs from their current downtown locations to the municipal jail site.

30. Are there any examples of jails having positive impacts – e.g., creating more jobs? What kind of mitigation could the City provide?

Jails can have a positive economic impact – corrections officer positions pay well and have good benefits. The jobs associated with construction can also have a positive impact on the economy. It is too soon to start identifying exactly what mitigation the City might provide – much of that will be specific to the site and the community that is chosen. For example, when King County located the Regional Justice Center (RJC) in Kent, the County agreed not to provide any on-site food services for staff and jurors – so that local restaurants and stores would benefit.

The [RJC](#) is an example of how a jail can be a good neighbor. The Kent Commons (a recreation center) is directly adjacent to the RJC. An ice hockey arena is being built across the street on land previously housing ball fields. Kent Station (a mix of movie theaters, retail stores, etc.) is within two blocks of the RJC. Seattle is committed to being a good neighbor wherever the municipal jail is located.

31. If the City builds a jail at a particular site, does that mean that bond offices and other ancillary services will also spring up nearby?

Seattle checked with the cities of Issaquah and Renton, which both run 50-bed jails, and learned neither has a bond office – inmates use the bond offices that are already located in downtown Seattle and Kent. If an inmate wants to post bail, she or he calls the bond office, and an agent can come to the jail to meet with the inmate. About 10 percent of Seattle's misdemeanor inmates are released because they use a bond company to post a bond on their behalf.