

Retain local control of juvenile justice

Here we go again. Every few years members of the consortium that operates Martin Hall Juvenile Detention Center in Medical Lake try to sell their program to the Okanogan County commissioners as a cost-saving proposal.

The consortium counties want to reduce their cost and liability by enticing Okanogan County into contracting for detention services. In 2003, our commissioners initially favored this proposal. Thorough study led them to conclude that the use of Martin Hall would cost much more and be bad for our kids and their families.

1. In September of 2003, I was part of the Okanogan County team that visited Martin Hall on a fact-gathering mission. My report is on file with the commissioners, the juvenile department, the courts and *The Chronicle*. Martin Hall is a good facility that offers many services comparable to Okanogan County Juvenile Detention. However, it is located 136.2 miles from Okanogan.

2. A one-way trip from Martin Hall will take about three hours, except in bad weather. Transportation staff reports that kids must be transported in special vans equipped with inside cages. During transportation the kids must be in leg irons, belly chains and handcuffs. This is ridiculously inhumane and probably could not survive a federal court challenge as

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cruel and unusual punishment.

3. By moving our kids 140 miles away, the commissioners will effectively remove them from family support, which often proves decisive in rehabilitation and correction of bad behavior. They will also be removed from effective contact with the probation officers and counselors who will work with them over the long run. They will have little meaningful face-to-face interaction with their lawyers.

4. Martin Hall says it can reduce the need for transportation by providing video links to the court. Most of us have found such video courts to be poor substitutes for face-to-face public hearings. In the case of kids who are in trouble, using TV hook-ups to save money is a really bad idea.

5. Martin Hall currently charges consortium members the price of \$155 per bed per day. They would charge us \$1.1 million per year, about \$250,000 more per year than our entire cost to run Okanogan County Juvenile Detention. This

amount does not include all transportation and other costs. When Spokane County withdrew in 2012, it was paying Martin Hall \$319,000 a year for five beds. (Over \$63,000 per year per bed.)

6. Martin Hall could approach with a "loss leader" type of deal. If Okanogan buys that deal and closes detention, there will be no going back when the deal turns sour. Once our detention is closed we will be at the mercy of the consortium members who will set costs and charges. Their mission is to reduce costs for their own constituents. The state auditor reported in 2013 that Martin Hall "has not effectively managed its operations, resulting in a decline in its financial condition."

7. Our detention center was built in 1974 and has served us well for 40 years. It was not designed to current standards and is getting worn out. However, our detention center does not pose the immediate danger to kids. Most problems cited by the commissioners have been repaired over the years. (doors, locks, fire alarms, communication systems, plumbing, etc.). A new detention center would have a useful life of over 30 years. If we save \$250,000 per year by not using Martin Hall, over 30 years that would produce \$7.5 million, more than enough to pay for a great facility.

Why would we spend Okanogan

County's money paying for buildings and employees in Spokane County when we could build here and continue employing many locals?

8. The judges, probation officers, staff, lawyers and families have tons of information that the commissioners are not aware of. Here is an example. What if on a given court day Martin Hall vans deliver 10 or 15 kids for court? They are still in belly chains, leg irons and handcuffs. There is no secure place for them to eat, go to the bathroom or meet with lawyers and family. Detention has been closed. There is no staff. Law prohibits placing them in an adult jail. Too late to say, "Oh, we didn't think of that."

9. What are law enforcement officers to do? If they catch kids committing crimes on Friday night, should they just let them go or must they drive them all the way to Martin Hall? Will the county need holding cells for detention of kids waiting for Martin Hall transports? Those cells must be constructed and staffed full time.

The bottom line? Perhaps my numbers are not perfect. I don't claim they are. The county spends millions every year. What priority will we give to the correction, punishment and rehabilitation of our kids who get in trouble?

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From our readers