

Our View

Common sense should prevail

Commissioners have an easy decision coming up.

What should they do with our kids when they get in trouble – use the current juvenile detention facility or ship the kids off 140 miles to Martin Hall in Medical Lake?

They claim they will make the choice based on what is best for the county, so it seems like it should have already been done.

Some decisions don't need fact-finding and public comments. Some just need common sense. Some decisions are just a no-brainer.

Commissioners act like Martin Hall is an acceptable option. We would be sending kids – our kids – off to kid prison (because, let's be honest, that is really what it is). Kids are carted off to a place far away from home, far away from the support they have, far away from the community they have victimized.

No, they wouldn't face their accusers or have to stare down a judge face to face. Video conferencing just doesn't have the same fear factor as a judge sitting 10 feet away telling you to get your life together, straighten up and fly right.

When a kid gets arrested at night, where does he or she go? Obviously, at the end of the day the kid has to sleep – and Martin Hall would be the only option if the commissioners choose that route.

If kids do make the trek to Okanogan County for court, they would be led in a chain gang across the state, likely making stops on the way.

Yes, several counties are using Martin Hall's services, but those counties do so because they have nowhere else to put their youth. Spokane only used the facility because its own facility was overcrowded. Through the use of sentencing alternatives, the county was able to reduce the crowding in its detention center, close out its Martin Hall account and then keep its kids at home.

Communication streams between our current juvenile detention facility and local schools, meaning kids can continue their education (or get a GED from the in-house testing center) while they are incarcerated. Isn't the point to get these kids back on the straight and narrow, not getting them ready for a life in the slammer?

the slammer?

Commissioners point to the age of our 42-year-old juvenile detention facility as an issue. Martin Hall was built in 1935 – so it's only 81 years old.

Is Martin Hall a secure, state-of-the-art facility? News reports don't sound like it. In February 2015, a rampaging teen caused \$60,000 worth of damage in a failed escape attempt by barreling through walls and doors.

Sure sounds secure.

The juvenile department – and the people who work there and live in our communities – have a vested interest to get these kids a chance at life and turn their lives around, no matter how bad life is.

If the center does close, what happens to the eight full-time staffers and numerous part-time staff who work there? These people live here, eat here and pay taxes. The detention center also has contracts with the schools and health care providers, along with purchasing goods and services from local companies. Guess where that money goes if the detention center closes? It isn't going into the Okanogan County economy.

Martin Hall? The facility is managed by Community, Counseling and Correctional Services Inc., of Butte, Mont. A company, like any other, that is dealing with the bottom line and turning a profit. Little Billy is just inmate 0187462. He's a number. The same bad numbers that commissioners are telling us that they need to consider.

But the county may save money.

If we throw caution to the wind and make the switch to Martin Hall and turn the juvenile detention facility into offices, what says that the multi-county consortium won't decide that Okanogan County needs to pay more when we have no rooms to put our youths?

What if the group decides to close Martin Hall if one of the counties pulls out of the deal? They considered it when Spokane County pulled out in 2012. Where do we go then if commissioners have already put county employees (or whatever) into the death trap they portray the juvenile detention building to be? Good enough for county employees, but not your kids?

No, commissioners are looking at numbers and talking about blown-up studies to justify our future and throwing it up to chance that maybe we'll save a few bucks. Who cares what our future holds?

In reality, the building is sound. If it was insufficient, it would have been condemned. Did they expect that grant writers hoping for funding on the proposed \$19.5 million justice center in 2012 – which would have included most of the courthouse complex and not just the juvenile detention center – would make the building sound like it as good as it was? Asking for state funds and grants and saying the facility is good enough usually won't get results.

Either way, if they think that a gamble on possibly saving money (though there is just as much, if not more of a chance that it could cost us more money in the long run) is more important than turning kids' lives around and making them productive members of society, common sense isn't going to play into this decision.

Yes, ultimately, the commissioners have the choice on what the county does with our kids who have made mistakes. But, hopefully, at least two commissioners will remember that we will all have a choice come November when we sit down with our election ballots and are asked for our opinion on their future.