

Jail accord could benefit state, county, taxpayers

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The state of Washington has 300 minimum- and medium-security inmates who need beds. Yakima County has almost 300 unused beds at its Pacific Avenue jail, plus another 200 available at its 950-bed behemoth in downtown Yakima. Yes, the two entities are talking, and that bodes well for the county, state and citizens who pay taxes to both.

The Legislature this session is looking at where to find \$7 million a year to house the 300 inmates. Last year, lawmakers approved a measure to house them in county jails, a nod to budget pressures that recently have led to the closure of three state prisons, including Ahtanum View Corrections Center in West Valley. And there could be more; the state anticipates needing about 1,000 beds over the next five years as the number of inmates rises, even as the number of places to put them shrinks.

And, of course, Yakima County has a surplus of jail beds courtesy of a jail-building scheme, dating back to the 1990s, that envisioned revenue through the rental of jail beds from other governmental entities in the state. That fell apart due to competition from other newly built jails in the state, plus governmental cutbacks brought by the national economic recession.

After the county lost contracts in 2010, it shuttered the Pacific Avenue jail near State Fair Park, laid off more than three dozen jail workers and shifted millions of dollars from other needs to bring the Department of Corrections' budget into line.

The county has since secured new contracts with Yakima Valley communities and a few from elsewhere in the state. But a multiyear contract with the state would utilize buildings that now stand empty and give a welcome boost to county coffers.

King County also has jail space, and that would be appealing to populous Western Washington municipalities that aim to cut travel costs and keep inmates closer to their families. But Yakima County isn't that far from Puget Sound and offers proximity to inmates from east of the Cascades. It also has experience in dealing with contract jail inmates.

The county also is talking to other communities about housing inmates in the downtown jail. But the state offers an economy of scale, both in numbers of inmates and in length of contract. The county has the space and the state needs it; this is an arrangement that is well worth the Legislature's attention.

- Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Sharon J. Prill, Bob Crider, Frank Purdy and Karen Troianello.



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Larry Boord · Top Commenter · Yakima, Washington

Move them all to the downtown Mall, I am sure there is an exit strategy down there somewhere/how.....Or if not given time there will be, for a handsome fee of course!

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This musical jail-bed game is almost laughable if it wasn't so sad. Back a couple of County Commissions ago, the County loses its contract renewals from outsiders for the then-new jail, the new jail is emptied and basically bankrupt because the County Commissioners at that time decided to play landlords. Then, the County eventually can't even afford it own OLD jail that becomes overcrowded with too many violent gangers, (The new jail was only rated for medium security) while they lay off half the jailers. Now, there isn't enough people to control all the prisoners in their new style of large rooms full of prisoners, so they farm them out to the lower valley jails. While OUR prisoners are in lower valley jails, (We are now the ones paying rent) the County is (hopefully) going to rent beds to the same people who poohed out on the... [See More](#)

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