

# Metal detectors at the county courthouse

By Steven Friederich

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**MONTESANO** — Metal detectors were installed at the historic Grays Harbor County courthouse early this morning.

County Commissioner Mike Wilson says it's a remarkable turnaround for security since the courthouse shooting of Deputy Polly Davin and the stabbing of Superior Court Judge Edwards on March 9.

But Edwards countered that the commissioners were being forced to act on the heels of a second "Order of Security" that he and his fellow judges had issued on Monday requiring metal detectors to be installed and a unanimous recommendation from a multi-department courthouse security committee that met last week.

"This order will remain in place in case the county commissioners change their minds and pull their funding," Edwards said.

The county commissioners approved a resolution Monday afternoon allowing County Commissioner Terry Willis to sign contracts with a private security company as soon as it's ready. Willis said this morning that she had not yet signed the contract, but the security company has been given the go-ahead to proceed.

Pierce County Security out of Tacoma was hired to bring a weapons screening team to the courthouse and the Juvenile Court at the county detention facility in Junction City.

The county is renting a metal detector from Pierce County Security and will use a county owned portable metal detector at Juvenile Court.

"We're proud to be here and lend a hand," said Bobby Nilsen of Pierce County Security.

For a line of a couple dozen people first thing this morning, it took a three-man weapons screening team about 10 minutes to go through all of them. Employees with official badges were allowed to bypass the security, but those without badges still needed to go through the metal detector. The real chance to work out the bugs will be next Monday, which is the biggest court day bringing dozens of attorneys, potential jurors, county employees and the public into the courthouse.

Jeff Conley of Brinnon figures it took about a minute or so to go through the screening this morning. When the metal detector went off, a screener used a special wand and waved it along his arms and legs.

"Given the attacks, it makes sense to set up metal detectors," Conley said. "I've been through them before. It's not a big deal to me."

The front door of the courthouse has been closed to the public with caution tape and a small sign telling visitors to use the entrance on the east side of the building. All other exits have been blocked off. Even a small bench area at the front of the courthouse has caution tape surrounding it.

"This will remain in place until such time as a permanent security model is established and in place," Scott told the county commissioners Monday afternoon.

Scott says the cost of the contract will be \$15 to \$20 per hour for the contracted personnel and \$150 to \$200 per month for the equipment rental.

"The total amount over the 90-day period is anticipated to be between \$33,000 to \$36,000," Scott wrote to the county commissioners, noting the contract could be extended if necessary.

Willis said this morning she didn't yet have the actual cost figures.

The decision to rent equipment and contract with personnel comes on the heels of a professional services contract the county commissioners signed last week with retired Thurston County detective Dave Haller. Haller was there this morning to see how the metal detectors were working out.

Edwards said he convened a courthouse security committee on Thursday, inviting Willis, Haller, Prosecutor Stew Menefee, Scott and officials with the county's Facilities and Central Services divisions. It's the same basic committee that came up with a never-implemented \$300,000 plan last summer for the county to improve its courthouse security.

Edwards said he wasn't pleased that the county commissioners "just wanted to study the issue some more," when he felt action was needed immediately. Edwards said it looked like the courthouse wouldn't get permanent security for another four months or so.

"The committee unanimously decided that metal detectors were needed now," Edwards said. "Although Commissioner Willis abstained, I think the message was clear. Weapons screening is obvious. ... I do not buy the argument that we need to wait and that this spending is frivolous and unnecessary."

Even with a metal detector, Edwards said that the judges will still keep intact their March 12 judicial order requiring deputies in the county's courtrooms.

"Just today, we had an incident requiring deputy involvement," Edwards said.

The situation Monday at about 10:30 a.m. involved a verbal domestic dispute between a man and a woman that started in the courtroom and continued to grow louder as they moved downstairs. By the time they were outside, they were surrounded by a half dozen law enforcement officers — corrections staff, deputies, a Montesano Police officer and Undersheriff Scott.

Utilities Director Kevin Varness said that the public will feel an inconvenience from the metal detectors, "But we're going to have to change the way we do things."

There's no more quick trips inside the courthouse now, he said. The public will need to give themselves extra time to go through the weapons screening.

Varness said his staff had installed keyless entry locks on the first and second floor of the courthouse and planned to install more locks at District Court in Aberdeen.

Varness said he's also helping the Sheriff's Office look into security cameras, noting that historical preservation grants the county previously received require that the courthouse's historic structure remain intact and wireless cameras would be the best bet to do that.

Judge Edwards said he and his fellow judges have declined the addition of keyless entry locks on the third floor. The initial courthouse security plan had keyless entries there.

"We now keep our courtroom doors locked when it's not in session, the jury room doors locked and other relevant areas," Edwards said. "If we have proper weapons screening, we won't need keyless entry locks. Our doors have locks already that work just fine."

Willis said that the decision to add metal detectors now will supplement the "bigger picture" of what courthouse security will look like at all of the county's buildings. Haller is helping fine-tune that plan now.

Willis said one idea being look at is to somehow fence off the County Administration Building and the courthouse and have one entry into the county campus.

"Could you physically do that here and run a fence around the entire perimeter?" Willis asked her fellow commissioners Monday morning.

That kind of idea could anger constituents looking for easy and quick access to renew their car tabs or record a deed at the Auditor's Office.

"There could be a five minute appointment and it takes you 20 minutes to get through security," Willis said.