

Island County commissioners to seek bids for public defender

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Beginning next year, Island County could be served by a new public defender.

During the Island County commissioner's weekly work session Wednesday, the board informally agreed to seek proposals from qualified law firms interested in being the county's primary public defense contractor.

The existing agreement is with the Law Offices of Thomas Pacher in Coupeville. The \$526,950-a-year contract was first signed in 2006 and currently pays for five attorneys and one investigator.

It expires at the end of this year.

"Since it's been seven years with the same contract, with one amendment, it's staff's recommendation (to seek new proposals)," said Don Mason, public defense administrator with the county's General Services Administration.

While the proposal is for the commissioners to decide, the matter was submitted for review to the county's three judges as a courtesy, said Budget Director Elaine Marlow. None of them objected.

The board of commissioners was equally supportive.

Chairwoman Kelly Emerson said long-term contracts can have unexpected consequences.

For example, in 2011 the state Supreme Court ordered King County to allow long-time public defenders the option of enrolling in the county's retirement system.

That led to a settlement approved by the Metropolitan King County Council earlier this year that made them county employees.

Emerson said she wants to avoid any possibility of that happening here.

"I don't want to end up in that same situation so I want to make sure we're taking all precautions," Emerson said.

“I think it’s just good practice after a number of years to go out and give other firms a chance to bid, keep folks competitive,” Commissioner Helen Price Johnson added.

Pacher could not be reached for comment but his firm is eligible to submit a new proposal.

Under a scheduled timeline, contract proposals would be sought from Aug. 1 through Sept. 3.

The board of commissioners would make its selection in October and the new contract would go into effect Jan. 1.

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