

Editorial: Don't rush revamp of King County public defenders

The Metropolitan King County Council should pause its work to restructure the county public-defender system and seek input from the community.

Seattle Times Editorial

THE financial and human costs of a failed public-defender system are on trial this week in a federal courtroom in Seattle. The cities of Burlington and Mount Vernon, facing a class-action lawsuit, are being forced to defend a rock-bottom defense contract in which two part-time lawyers handled a combined 2,000 cases each year.

Across town, the Metropolitan King County Council is moving forward on the largest restructuring of local public defense in four decades.

The difference in approach between King County and the Skagit County cities to this fundamental right is night and day.

In King County, restructuring is mandated by a 2012 state Supreme Court ruling which declared public defenders, who previously worked for nonprofit agencies, are effectively county employees. With the ruling, the county could not afford to outsource employee-risk management to outside agencies.

The County Council has spent months deliberating various alternatives intended to preserve a national reputation for high-quality public defense and an arms-length distance from political influence.

This is a complicated shift. That is why, despite the council's diligence, it should make an extra effort to reach out to interested community groups. In letters to the council last month, the King County Bar Association, the ACLU of Washington, the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project and OneAmerica asked the council to convene a task force and publicly explore options.

Council Chairwoman Julia Patterson disagrees, she says, because the council and staff exhaustively vetted other public-defense models.

"Quite honestly, we have the information before us," she said. "It's time to move now."

Seattle, of course, is prone to bogging down good ideas with glacial process. But in this case, the request is timely and reasonable: This is a once-in-a-generation restructuring.

Some potential new public-defense systems require a public vote to amend the county charter. Getting community buy-in via a task force, or less formal public forums, raises the chances of success at the ballot.

This is too important of a decision to rush. Open the process to legal experts, social-justice advocates and those who may one day need a good defense lawyer.