

Perp Walks to Become a Thing of the Past in Kitsap County Courts

PORT ORCHARD —

By Josh Farley

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Kitsap County's wheels of justice will soon get a little grease.

Starting in January, all criminal defendants making initial court appearances will be routed through Kitsap County District Court — instead of superior court, where felony suspects usually go — regardless of whether they're accused of murder or a gross misdemeanor like DUI.

A district court judge will set bail, conditions of possible release and other preliminary matters. It will all be done via a video feed, so the accused never has to leave the Kitsap County jail.

If a defendant opts for a quick guilty plea, prosecutors will have a plea agreement and sentencing recommendation ready to quickly resolve the case, saving time and lawyers' salaries.

The new system “has the potential to streamline the (criminal) process,” said Russ Hauge, Kitsap County prosecutor, adding, “ultimately it will save the county money” during a [time of budget cuts](#).

The current system involves a cumbersome process of hauling groups of jailed felony defendants — handcuffed to one another — down a hallway and into Kitsap County Superior Court.

The county's district court has its own initial appearances for misdemeanor level crimes. But in January, they'll take on the felony superior court cases as well, with the judges adjusting their calendars to take a burden off their counterparts in superior court.

The move requires an investment of less than \$40,000, paid for out of a prosecutor's office property forfeiture fund that can't go toward salaries, to install equipment that will allow felony defendants in jail to “appear” in district court by video feed.

Ned Newlin, chief of corrections for the Kitsap County Sheriff's Office, said that using video monitoring means less chance of confrontation or incident that could come with taking defendants to superior court.

“We're very excited about it,” Newlin said of the new process.

Clark Tibbits, head of the [burgeoning Kitsap County Public Defender's Office](#), said the new process should make the system run more smoothly. Cases that could be resolved quickly now can be, he said.

Hauge said that having public defenders employed by the county — there will be three including Tibbits in January — makes such a system possible. They'll be able to work with defendants who cannot afford a lawyer at the start of the case. And should the defendant want to plead guilty at the onset, the new system allows for speedy disposition.

Should they want to fight the charges, a lawyer — from the public defender's office or more likely from a contracted private firm — will be assigned to their case and it would continue.

But Hauge said that more than 90 percent of criminal cases result in guilty pleas. And should the defendant choose to go that route from the get-go, it means fewer court dates, less lawyer's fees, and gives the superior court bench time to focus on "people charged with serious crimes," he said.



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