

# King County Council votes against shuttering youth jail

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The Patricia H. Clark Children and Family Justice Center on Monday, Sept. 26, 2022. (Kylie Cooper / The Seattle Times)

By [David Kroman](#)

*Seattle Times staff reporter*

The Metropolitan King County Council voted 8-0 Tuesday, on a motion declaring its intent to keep open the county's juvenile detention center, while heaping on language to make clear the body favored alternatives where available and would work toward making the secure facility as humane and restorative as possible.

The original motion was brought by Councilmember Reagan Dunn, who sought to effectively end any discussion about closing the facility, as criminal justice advocates have aimed to do for years. Though nonbinding, he said the motion was an important statement at a time when reports of youth crime have climbed.

"There's a major league juvenile crime problem that we need to remedy," he said.

After being deferred for months, the amended motion finally won enough support from members of the council, who were satisfied it conveyed a balance between seeking

better paths for young people and acknowledging the realities of dealing with serious crimes.

“Yes, we need a secure building for public safety reasons,” said Councilmember Girmay Zahilay. “It’s critical to protect our community and ensure that those who have committed serious offenses are housed in a way that prevents further harm. And it’s equally true that incarceration, the traditional models of incarceration, can have devastating effects on the developing brains of young people, making them more likely to reoffend, and perpetuating a cycle of violence and incarceration.”

The vote on this measure is the culmination of months of back and forth on the council, though the debate over the detention center itself has been ongoing for more than a decade, centering on whether jailing young people is an inevitability.

Voters signed off on the new \$210 million facility in 2012 — named The Judge Patricia H. Clark Children and Family Justice Center — setting off years of activism and court fights. Though some elected officials turned against the construction of the new building, it was ultimately completed and opened in 2020, just as racial justice protests rocked Seattle.

Under pressure from racial justice advocates, and at the height of tensions in 2020, King County Executive Dow Constantine committed to closing the facility by 2025 and moving dollars away from “systems that are rooted in oppression.”

That timeline was kicked to 2028. But while an advisory committee has recommended ways to improve how youth are dropped off and supported there, neither Constantine nor the committee presented a clear path to the center’s closure. Members of the council acknowledged it was not likely to be closed in 2028.

The number of young people being held in the center has ticked up since its low point of 2021, though is still far below the peaks of the early 2000s.

A recent audit noted this decrease, but also found that stays at the youth detention center were increasing as the remaining cases were more complex. The average stay has tripled since 2017, from 12 days to 36 days, [the report found](#), with more than 200 kids held for more than 100 days and some for over a year.

While incarcerated, young people are taught by faculty with Seattle Public Schools working inside the center. Nevertheless, the facility is not meant for such long stays, the report concluded.

“The support provided there does not meet the educational, enrichment, and mental health needs of youth facing long periods of detention,” it said.



King County Council's Law and Justice Committee members from left, Rod Dembowski, Jorge Barón, Reagan Dunn and Claudia Balducci, who is on Zoom, listen to public commentary during a July 2024 meeting to... (Ivy Ceballo / The Seattle Times)More

Dunn's motion was a means to get his colleagues on the record pledging the facility would remain open.

"I maintain that by focusing on ending secure detention and closing the juvenile detention facility, the county perpetuates a lose-lose situation — one where the safety of the public is at risk, and juvenile offenders have less access to rehabilitative services that help get their lives on the right track," he said in a statement before Tuesday's meeting.

Other members of the council agreed that closure of the facility was not likely to happen anytime soon. Still, the council split on the utility of Dunn's motion, with some concerned it would hamstring the county's ability to explore alternatives and represented an endorsement of the status quo.

"The reason that I did not support Councilmember Dunn's motion as originally drafted is because we need to do better," Councilmember Jorge Barón said Tuesday.

Before the meeting, a long line of public commenters weighed in on the motion, often alternating between those who want the facility closed and those who don't.

King County is required by state law to keep detention centers for both youth and adults. Closing the youth center would likely require action from the Legislature.

Meanwhile, King County and Seattle City Hall are caught in a back and forth over the operations of the adult jail. Seattle city officials have expressed frustration about booking restrictions due to staffing shortages there. Constantine has pushed back, saying public safety concerns in Seattle are not the fault of the jail.

**David Kroman:** 206-464-3196 or [dkroman@seattletimes.com](mailto:dkroman@seattletimes.com); *Seattle Times* staff reporter David Kroman covers Seattle City Hall.