

Dear Executive Constantine:

The Public Defender Association (PDA) advocates for justice system reform and develops alternatives that shift from a punishment paradigm to a system that supports individual and community health. We write to you today to urge you and the King County Council to embrace the moratorium on continued construction of the new youth detention facility.

We understand that you, Councilmembers, judges, most public defenders and many community leaders, including some who have come to re-think their support, originally proposed this facility with the best of intentions, and that a majority of voters agreed to pay for it. We also understand that, at least in the near term and despite rhetorical commitments to seeking Zero Youth Detention, some young people will be arrested and detained on suspicion of having committed serious crimes, and agree that there must be a detention option for those young people other than adult jails.

We believe it's important to acknowledge the good faith that originally motivated this project, because those same sentiments now could well lead you to pause and search for a new direction.

You recently have committed to re-framing juvenile justice and juvenile detention in public health principles. Why has this not alleviated community calls for a moratorium, and why have community voices only redoubled in their call for County leaders to pause construction?

We suggest it is because the principles of public health are in fundamental tension with court- and coercion-based interventions to address behavior issues that stem from trauma, extreme poverty and vulnerability to sudden violence. Many of us worry that a nominal re-frame under the auspices of Public Health serves more to conceal the ill-advised and often counter-productive nature of court-based interventions, than to fundamentally transform what happens in the juvenile justice system.

Even more pressing is the stark contrast between the immense cost of building the Youth and Family Justice Center complex, and the nearly complete failure to date to invest meaningfully in community-based diversion alternatives that are our best chance of actually achieving Zero Youth Detention. If Zero Youth Detention is to be more than lip service, robust systems of care that police, prosecutors and community members can turn to in lieu of arrest, detention and prosecution are essential. Extraordinary community leaders have been hard at work for years to develop such viable alternatives, but they have not received the kind of meaningful investment that would make this community-based path a real option in lieu of the formal justice system.

Many promising community-based efforts that could present an organized alternative to detention, prosecution and conviction are starved for resources, while hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on this project. Regardless of whether construction and capital dollars can directly be re-programmed, this contrast makes it seem as though County policy is still for the criminal justice system to be the only well-funded option for youth whose behavior harms others. This is not a vision most community leaders can support.

We encourage County leaders to embrace a moratorium on the construction of the new youth detention facility and to open sustained dialogue with the community about alternatives. The conversation about where public resources are being invested and whether that pattern is really consistent with the values statements that public officials have often made during this controversy is valuable and urgently needed. We commit ourselves to participating in such a dialogue and will do all we can to support a robust system of community-based alternatives to detention and prosecution whenever possible.

Thank you for considering the mounting call to pause for this conversation. It's never too late to improve our collective direction and, to the maximum extent possible, revise choices that no longer serve us. We ask for your partnership to ensure that decisions made nearly a decade ago, however well intentioned, are not preventing what we now know to be preferable approaches that command community support from taking root.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lisa Dugaard', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Lisa Dugaard
Director