

## **Executive Summary and Recommendations**

The Criminal Justice Sales Tax Citizens Advisory Committee was charged with conducting a review of the criminal justice system and determining whether or not additional resources are necessary to address needs which are not being met through the normal budgeting process. The committee has completed this work and its findings and recommendations follow.

The good news is that people in Benton County are significantly less likely to be victims of crime than was the case in 1995. Since that index year the number of crimes reports to law enforcement agencies has declined. The decline in crime has not been the same across the county; some jurisdictions have seen a greater reduction than others. The trend has not been smooth from year to year; there have been up-ticks which have temporarily altered the downward trend. It appears multiple factors have contributed to this trend. Even so the direction of the trend is evident.

Concurrently there is evidence that in certain parts of the criminal justice system there has been that workload indicators have also decreased. The number of felony referrals from law enforcement agencies to the Prosecuting Attorney has been trending downward for a number of years and with that the number of felony filings in Superior Court has also been trending downward. A similar pattern is evident in the declining number of criminal informations filed in Juvenile Court. When county population growth and the number of additional officers is taken into consideration the downward trend of these workload indicators is phenomenal.

That is the good news but there is also bad news. The committee heard from many sources that the cost of doing business has been going up. For example, medical expenses for both employee medical benefits and for the care of jail inmates have risen at a rate greater than inflation. Another illustrative example is the additional cost of unfunded mandates. For example, in the past officers did not need to obtain a search warrant to examine vehicles following a traffic stop if there is evidence of an illegal substance in the vehicle. A warrant is now required and this raises the unit cost of service delivery. There are numerous other examples brought to the awareness of the committee but the bottom line is the same: it is more costly to do business.

Additionally the types of crimes and the ways in which they are handled have become increasingly complicated. Cyber-crimes ranging from identity thefts, to scams to child trafficking add to the time it takes to investigate cases and calls for new skill sets across the system.

The effect of citizen initiatives has restricted the ability (and perhaps the willingness) of legislative bodies at the municipal and county level to raise taxes to fully cover operating expenses for the criminal justice system and to fund new programs. The effect of these restrictions has not been borne equally across the system. The committee was aware of the varying levels of additional resources as it formed its recommendation.

In light of the above considerations the committee voted to recommend to the Benton County Board of Commissioners the following action.

**The committee recommends the Board of Commissioners place before the voters of Benton County a ballot measure for a criminal justice sales tax in the amount of 0.1%.**

The committee was fully aware the revenue generated from a voter-approved criminal justice sales tax at 0.1% would not meet the identified and important needs of all components of the criminal justice system. Several law enforcement agencies identified unmet needs which could not be matched if the increase was at 0.3%. The committee was also aware that the RCW allows municipalities to ask voters within their boundaries to pass a local criminal justice sales tax measure.

The committee understands it cannot direct how the revenue should be used by the county and each municipality. That is the responsibility of the county and the cities to decide as the ballot measure is written (assuming it gets to that point). That being said, the committee believes the identified needs detailed in this report should be given great weight in the allocation process.

There was considerable discussion of the need for services for the mentally ill who come in contact with the criminal justice system. For many years there has been discussion about having a secure treatment facility which could be used in lieu of incarceration for people with acute psychiatric illnesses. The committee understands the benefits attendant to such a facility but in the end it was concluded recommending a portion of additional revenue for this purpose would stretch the definition of the criminal justice system. The committee was frustrated by the lack of reliable and useful data in support of a secure evaluation and treatment center, and the prevalence of individuals with mental illnesses who come in contact with the criminal justice system. It should also be noted that illegal activity associated with substance abuse was well documented and is likely to be a far more substantial contributor to criminal activity.

In the opinion of the committee no revenue from this measure should be used to supplant existing revenue in the general budget used for criminal justice purposes. In addition, the committee recommends the Commissioners implement performance audits so the public can be assured their tax

dollars are spent on programs and services which truly have a positive impact on crime and the factors which contribute to crime.

In conclusion, the committee believes the public is well served by all those called to service in the criminal justice system. In order to maintain the quality of life here in Benton County which they ably strive to accomplish and to be able to address emergent problems such as cyber-crime and criminal gang activity it is necessary to have an additional revenue stream to provide the resources identified in this report.