

Whatcom County Council meeting – Jour 307 assignment – submitted on 02/24/21

Crime rates have increased in Whatcom County as COVID-19 forced the justice system to adopt changes to limit the spread of the virus, while reducing costs and duration of trials and incarcerations, the county prosecutor said during a county council meeting on Tuesday.

“People who are getting out are committing new crimes while they’re on pre-trial release, and that’s happening a lot and pretty regularly with things such as driving, and in serious charges too,” said Prosecuting Attorney Eric Richey.

“We currently have 11 murder cases pending in our courts,” he said. “That’s more than double what used to be a high number.” Other offenses include sexual assault on a minor and two attempted murders — one of which committed by an individual on bail for a serious felony.

Criminal court cases have been piling up during the past year in Whatcom County Prosecuting Attorney’s Office, as the pandemic has disrupted the normal flow of trials. Following the safety measures in vigor, court appearances moved from the courtroom to video conferencing platforms, which further slowed down the judicial process.

At the same time, there have been more people pleading guilty over the past month than during the entirety of 2020, as the office made probation more accessible for minor crimes. According to Richey, the increase of guilty pleas and people on probation could lead to a speedier reduction of the trial backlog, and a decrease in incarceration rates and costs.

Another negative trend observed throughout the pandemic has been the decrease of people entering drug courts, meaning that fewer individuals will receive drug addiction support, choosing instead to apply for one year of probation, or to avail themselves of lower charges and penalties.

On the other hand, Richey announced that the Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD) program has been successful in admitting 35 individuals. LEAD assists people with behavioral health issues who have committed minor crimes by providing housing and mental health support, as well as career opportunities and medication.

Trials are scheduled to resume on Mar. 15, starting with one trial a week at the Superior Court. However, the county’s justice system might need more funding for legal proceedings to occur in an efficient and timely manner, and to support the office’s overwhelmed staff.