

New county mental health and detox center aims to reduce incarceration, treat behavioral crisis

BY CONOR WILSON

After nearly a decade of planning, a new mental health and detox facility opened its doors to patients in Whatcom County on January 4.

The Crisis Stabilization Center will replace the Whatcom County Triage Center as the only facility of its kind in the county for treating those experiencing mental health or substance abuse crises. The new center at 2026 Division Street in Bellingham adds an additional 12,000 square feet

and 19 beds compared to the old facility.

The 24,450-square-foot center will be split into two 16-bed sides, one for mental and behavioral health stabilization and the other for substance withdrawal and detox. The mental health services will be managed by Compass Health and the detox side will be run by Pioneer Human Services.

Patients at the facility will receive 24/7 nursing and most are expected to stay between three and five days. Upon discharge,

patients will be provided ongoing treatment options focused on recovery.

The center cost \$12.5 million; the state Department of Commerce provided \$7 million, the North Sound Behavioral Health Organization contributed \$2.5 million and the county's behavioral health fund contributed the remaining \$3 million. Blaine Police Department sergeant Michael

Munden said the center provides an alternative to incarceration and will help those experiencing behavioral health crises seek treatment as an alternative to the county jail system.

"As state-run behavioral health facilities have closed, more and more people with behavioral health issues are homeless and unable to care for themselves," he said.

The increased capacity is also expected to reduce the number of individuals seeking treatment at PeaceHealth St. Joseph's Hospital.

The center will primarily serve those seeking voluntary treatment. Currently, the center is not allowed to involuntarily hold patients, but Compass Health is working on getting a certification

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▲ The Crisis Stabilization Center, located at 2026 Division Street in Bellingham.

Photo by Conor Wilson

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Description of the business: We are a bulk refillery market, where one can fill their own container with everything from toothpaste, shampoo, lotion, essential oils, CBD to laundry soda, soap, hand sanitizer to flours, grains, granola, honey, and spices. We sell containers too for your convenience. We also offer a wide variety of household and body care accessories made of sustainable alternatives to plastic. In the spring through fall, we also offer fresh locally grown produce.

How the business started: We wanted to create a community hub where folks could not only come to shop for quality, natural, and sustainable products, but also feel a sense of connection and inspiration for conscious consumerism.

Future goals: We look forward to being a long-term presence in Blaine and being part of the growth of this wonderful town. We endeavor to continually provide high quality products and service that reflect our own learning about sustainable living and practices. We commit to providing our community with customer service filled with care, friendship, and joy. Thank you for supporting us and making our day!

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Community members show interest in city council seat; 5 selected for interviews

BY GRACE MCCARTHY

Blaine City Council unanimously voted to accept applications that were submitted after the deadline for the at-large councilmember position, formerly held by Alicia Rule, and moved forward five applicants to be interviewed February 1.

interviewed February 1.

During a January 25 special meeting, council discussed reducing the number of applicants to be interviewed, which they can do according to the council rules of procedure. The city received 13 applications, some of which were submitted past the January 15 deadline because the position was advertised as open until filled.

"I think we can all agree the number of applicants is really cool," councilmember Garth Baldwin said. "It's great the number of people who want to help our city."

Council has procedures to appoint new councilmembers but doesn't for reducing the number of applicants, according to the city. Councilmembers ultimately voted 6-0 to move forward by approving the applications submitted after the deadline.

During discussion period, councilmember Eric Davidson asked Baldwin to recuse himself due to a statement Baldwin made in a previous meeting when he asked council to consider selecting a female candidate or candidate similar to Rule, because that is who residents voted for. Davidson argued this statement created a seed of doubt that if a woman were selected, it would only be for her gender.

Mayor Bonnie Onyon clarified that Baldwin was expressing his own opinion, not council's, and therefore did not need to be recused.

Councilmembers then convened in executive session to discuss candidate qualifications.

After the executive session, councilmembers unanimously voted on five candidates who would move forward for interviews. Applicants moving forward in the process will be interviewed during a February 1 special council meeting.

Applicants to be interviewed:
John Calvin Armerding

Armerding is a current math teacher at Meridian High School. He earned his bachelor's degree in aerospace engineering at the University of Washington in 1989 and completed the Washington state post-baccalaureate teaching program in 2004.

Armerding has served on the city of Blaine's planning commission since about 2012, serving the past three years as chair of the commission. He is also president of Combat Veteran's International, a veteran's nonprofit he has been a member of since 1998.

"I joined the planning commission because I wanted to ensure that we maintained our trajectory of reasonable growth and attractiveness to visitors while not losing the small town feel that originally caused me to purchase a home here," he wrote in his application, later adding, "I believe that city council needs to continue to carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages of any proposal that spends the money of the residents to ensure that we are efficiently utilizing our hard earned dollars."

Sukhwant Singh Gill

Gill has been a business owner for over 26 years in Blaine, run-

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Custer derailment leaked nearly 30,000 gallons of crude oil

BY GRACE MCCARTHY

Investigators have determined that nearly 30,000 gallons of oil leaked from train cars during the December 22 Custer derailment.

Authorities have yet to publicly announce what caused the 108-car train to derail in Custer, toppling ten cars from the tracks that forced evacuations.

Washington State Department of Ecology (DOE) reported on its website that 28,962 gallons of oil either burned, evaporated or were recovered. Workers were unable to recover 5,400 to 8,000 gallons of the highly flammable Bakken crude oil.

To remediate the remaining contamination, crews have installed a bioventing system that pipes oxygen into the ground and over time breaks down petroleum hydrocarbons.

DOE spokesperson Ty Keltner said this is not guaranteed to clean up all of the contamination,

but is a method that BNSF has used to effectively clean up other oil spills in the past.

Dave Byers, DOE response section manager, said the cleanup process will take years until fully complete. "It won't be a time-frame of a few weeks or months," he said.

DOE workers will construct groundwater monitoring wells at the site next month to detect off-site oil migration. Testing of nearby wells has shown no evidence of contamination, the DOE reported.

BNSF Railway engineers can better estimate how long the cleanup will take once they know more about the organic content of the soil, particle size and porosity of soil, Byers said.

Crews completed excavating contaminated soil and adding new soil on January 6, DOE reported. Air monitoring also stopped that week after finding no air quality concerns.

Byers said it's difficult to compare this accident to other derailments because all accidents are slightly different. The Custer derailment stood out from other incidents in that the resulting fire burned off oil, the contamination is not suspected to have escaped the derailment site and there is no evidence of harmed wildlife.

Byers' last crude oil derailment experience was the 2016 derailment in Mosier, Oregon. Although not in the state, Washington DOE responded to the scene where 16 of the 96 cars derailed about 600 feet from the Columbia River, releasing about 47,000 gallons of oil.

Trains, pipelines and vessels transport over 20 billion gallons of oil through Washington per year, according to DOE data. Since 2005, the state has had a goal of zero spills and U.S. Coast Guard data shows Washington maintains one of the lowest spill rates in the U.S.



▲ Crews completed excavating contaminated soil and adding new soil on January 6.

Photo courtesy Washington State Department of Ecology

"Fortunately, our experience with crude oil derailments and fires isn't too deep," Byers said.

Crude oil shipments have continually increased since 2012,

when it first started being transported by rail in Washington, according to DOE's latest quarterly report on crude oil shipments by rail and pipeline.

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to allow holds up to 12 hours for behavioral crises. Holds will not be used on the detox side.

Whatcom County Council identified the increasing need for the stabilization center in 2015, and made it a key priority of the Incarceration Prevention and Reduction Task Force, according to the county website. Jack Hovenier, co-chair of the task force,

said the county started funding the project a decade ago but construction was delayed due to uncertainty on how the county would provide long-term funding for staff and maintenance, as well as how to cover costs for individuals needing care without insurance.

The facility's goal is to not turn anyone away, Hovenier said. This means state funding will be needed to provide services to those who do not qualify for Medicaid or cannot afford it.

"Study after study suggests the time to help someone stop using is when they're motivated to do it," he said. "If you tell someone, 'Great, we will help you detox in three days,' the odds of them returning aren't that high. Having the capacity to meet people at the time they're ready to stop is huge."

Despite the increase in facility capacity, Munden said he expects availability will continue to be an issue.

"The sad fact is every commu-

nity in Whatcom County faces this issue, so we will all be competing for space," he said. "Often this means we are only able to help those who are clearly not capable of caring for themselves or that pose a danger to themselves or the community."

Long-term funding assurance for the facility, beyond a few years, is not guaranteed, Hovenier said. However, he said he is optimistic Whatcom County will find a way to fund the facility, given the wide support from the

county government and county executive Satpal Sidhu.

"Most studies indicate when you spend money on these services, the social good more than pays off the investment you make," he said. "It's smart public policy, and it's compassionate, but it's also quite practical in terms of minimizing harm to the rest of society."

To access the center's services, call 360/676-2020.

Applicants ...

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ning a gas station, gift store and restaurant. He attended university in India before becoming a certified nursing aid in Washington.

Gill serves on the Blaine tourism advisory committee and has been president of Guru Nanak Guru Sikh Temple for three years and served on its board for eight years. During the pandemic, the temple has been serving food and clothing to Whatcom County residents in need. In his application, Gill said he has a strong working knowledge of Blaine's economy and experience managing large budgets through economic fluctuation.

"I'm a hard working community member with deep understanding of needs of our city," Gill wrote in his application. "I have a goal for the city of Blaine to be a great place for living, great place for business and tourism with great opportunity for recreation, while preserving neighborhood character and our historic landmarks."

Kerena Higgins

Higgins received her bachelor's degree from the University of Vermont and law degree from Seattle University. In her application, Higgins said over 20 years' of public service has taught her the complexities of large budgets, balancing competing interests on complicated issues and the importance of listening to stake-

holders.

Higgins is currently the managing attorney at Regional Services Division who provides client advice and coordinates legal services to higher education in the area, including Western Washington University and Educational Service District 189.

"I have lived in the city for years, and am excited about the opportunity to put my skills and voice to use," Higgins wrote in her application. "I appreciate that now is an especially challenging time, and I feel it's important now more than ever to do what I can to be a positive influence on our community."

Sheli Moore

Moore attended Blaine High School before receiving her associate's degree from Edmonds Community College and going to Bellingham Technical College for bookkeeping. Moore is the co-vice chair of the Salishan Neighborhood Association, a member of the neighborhood's gardeners market and commissioner for the Blaine-Birch Bay Park and Recreation District 2.

"[I] would like to become involved with the city of Blaine and learn all that is going on and help it become the best city it can be," Moore wrote in her application.

Sharon Somers-Hill

Somers-Hill is a registered nurse in Washington and formerly Canada, New Zealand and California. She is a former co-owner of an importing business in New Zealand. She attended Orange

Coast College in California before graduating from the former Vancouver General Hospital School of Nursing. She also studied theology and leadership at Fuller Theological Seminary in California.

"When people feel their voices are heard, they find it easier to become engaged and are more likely to begin to care about their neighborhoods and their neighbors," Somers-Hill wrote in her application. "Instead of Blaine being cut up into neighborhoods we could all feel as one, that we all have a voice, and we are all valued."



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