

Tri-City Herald eEdition

Pasco, WA



Tri-City Herald file

Franklin County Sheriff Jim Raymond is on a mission to get the Franklin County Commission to give \$12,500 toward a feasibility study that would see if the former Kennewick General Hospital campus in downtown Kennewick could be turned into an in-patient treatment and recovery center.

Franklin County Sheriff Jim Raymond sees people struggling every day with homelessness, drug addiction and mental health crises and knows his jail is not the right place for them.

He is part of a group that wants to know if the old hospital in downtown Kennewick could be converted into an in-patient treatment and recovery center.

While many support the idea, not all are behind spending the money to see if the Auburn Street facility is a viable option.

The Franklin County commissioners have turned down a request for \$12,500 toward a feasibility study.

That decision came after Benton County commissioners unanimously approved contributing the same amount.

The proposal is being [led by the Kennewick Public Hospital District](#) and the Benton Franklin Recovery Coalition. The study would provide an in-depth look at possible services and costs.

But Franklin County commissioners aren't so sure it's worth the look — even as Commissioner Brad Peck described \$12,500 as “budget dust” at a recent meeting.

So the sheriff has taken it on himself to get them to change their minds.

He is asking other elected officials to encourage the Franklin commissioners to rethink their decision. He wants them to buy in to fixing a bicounty problem, for both community safety and those who need the services.

The sheriff, a former 33-year member of the Pasco police force, went before the Pasco City Council last week as a citizen to make his plea.

“When you have a problem in your community, you have to look at that problem holistically,” said Raymond. “I’m here to tell you, that you all as a community have a problem with homelessness, with drug addiction issues and with mental health issues, and it’s increasing

every day.”

“We currently address those situations by throwing people in jail, quite honestly,” he added. “And then we charge police officers or jailers to try to mitigate those problems in a jail setting, and it’s not working. It’s failing.”

Raymond argues it’s the responsibility of the Tri-Cities as a collective body to do something to make a difference.

To kick start the effort, a group of service providers, law enforcement officers, firefighters, prosecutors, lawyers and community members came together more than a year ago to look at the problem and see what could be done.

The Tri-Cities is the only major metropolitan area in Eastern Washington without a detox center.

The Recovery Coalition’s dream is to have a bicounty recovery center modeled after the Tri-Cities Cancer Center, although the coalition would stick with education and advocacy and not own, manage or finance the center.

The study on the downtown Kennewick location, which currently houses the Trios Women’s and Children’s Hospital, will cost \$46,000 to \$50,000 with the potential to be more, said Human Services Manager Kyle Sullivan.

The hospital district has said it will cover half of that cost, and asked the two counties to come up with the other \$25,000.

The thought is that while the large facility would be used for both

secured and unsecured bed space, the rest of the old hospital campus could house related service providers, such as counselors and medical professionals.

The Women's and Children's Hospital could move to Trios' Southridge location and make the downtown property available for sale.

The question is just how much remodeling, renovation and re-purposing costs will be, especially if there is asbestos or lead paint in the old building.

Franklin County Commissioner Peck said earlier this month that everybody is on the same page about the need.

But he thinks if the hospital site really was a viable option, then the coalition should be able to move forward with or without Franklin County's share of the money.

If \$12,500 breaks the study, then it is not a good business model, he said.

Peck said the organization should come in and try to persuade them to participate. It isn't about the money, but showing that the study is even worth doing and allowing commissioners to have input on what will be researched, he said.

"If it's not about the money, then why are you holding out?" Raymond asked.

Commission Chairman Clint Didier tried to push his colleagues into a vote to support the study, but his motion fell flat with neither Peck nor Commissioner Bob Koch seconding it.

So, the sheriff turned to city leaders instead.

Raymond later told the Tri-City Herald that something is wrong when two people can hold up an entire process.

He says he has had enough and took it upon himself, as a coalition member and the sheriff, to help educate his community about a possible fix.

"At the end of the day, we have a problem and have to fix it. You can't just check out of society's problems and not be a part of the solution. And if you don't want to be part of the solution, then shut up and get out of the way of the people who are truly trying to get to the solution."

Raymond presented the city council with copies of the recent commission meetings when the feasibility study was discussed.

"I don't want to put words in people's mouths, i.e. the commissioners, but you certainly can listen to everything and all the interplay both audibly and visually to make your own determinations ...," he said.

He gave an example of one Franklin County jail inmate with autism, saying, "We're babysitting him because we have the lack of resources and spaces to put somebody in order to help them through their crises."

"I don't think you, as leaders of your community, should just stand by and idly not support what is taking place here in a financial way," Raymond added.

"I would ask that you take the time to look at this and to engage your commissioners and to encourage them to change the decision that

they made because the money that was supposed to go to that is everybody's money, it's taxpayers' money."

Pasco Mayor Saul Martinez thanked the sheriff. He said he appreciated Raymond's request and will bring up the issue in future council discussions.