

Brandon M. Thompson
Judge



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WASHINGTON COUNTY CIRCUIT COURT
150 North First Avenue
Hillsboro, OR 97124

March 19, 2025

House Committee on Judiciary

Re: HB 3180

Dear Chair Kropf and Committee Members:

I am writing in support of HB 3180, the Washington County Courthouse Replacement Planning Project. As a judge in this courthouse and a practitioner here for more than 15 years, I can say that this courthouse needed to be replaced years ago. As a practitioner, the only places you can meet with your clients are in the restroom, in a stairwell or the hallways surrounded by other attorneys, parties, and witnesses. I have tried cases in eight other courthouses and none are as inadequate as the Washington County Courthouse.

As a Judge I have had the unique opportunity to see and reflect on the building's deficiencies. And the simple truth is, words and arguments don't really effectively capture the human experience for crime victims, families, jurors, and participants when they are forced to endure some incredibly painful realities of trying to seek justice in this building. The experience of literally having to relive and discuss painful experiences in these unreasonable spaces adds to their trauma and compounds their sense of not being safe.

Some of the building's issues are obvious like its age and seismic vulnerability while others are less obvious like its failure to meet modern accessibility standards and lack of compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In our courtrooms, people in wheelchairs or on electric scooters cannot fit between the bar to approach counsel table. Additionally, there is only one entrance that accommodates people with disabilities and it requires a lift to get to the first floor. In my current courtroom, I have had both a juror and a witness have to occupy the well of the court where the attorneys argue because they cannot ascend to either the jury box or the witness stand. Judge Erik Bucher has a courtroom that is a mirror of mine and he has had similar experiences. The first photo below is where a qualified juror had to sit in front of an empty jury chair in her wheelchair with her companion animal for a multiday trial. There is simply no other place to accommodate a juror in a wheelchair.



This second photos shows where a victim of an extremely violent assault and multiple sexual assaults had to be placed in her wheelchair as she could not access the witness stand. As you can see in both photos, a ramp to access the jury box or witness stand is not an option as it would create a trip hazard for other jurors and witnesses. This experience was especially troubling as at times it was hard for me to hear her testimony and I could not see anything but the back of her head. While I know that the ADA does not apply unmodified structures prior to its passage, this is neither a welcoming nor trauma informed way to treat people.



This third photo shows the only place you could put a wheelchair as we do have a ramp to this location, but it blocks the egress to and from the jury room and would block jurors exit if there was an emergency.



In addition to the physical limitation of our courthouse, there are additional issues with its construction that impact the public. We have fielded many complaints from jurors about how being on jury duty for multiple weeks starts to impact their mental health as there is no natural light in most of our courtrooms. This is also a concern for most of the jury rooms. Recently I had a to release an empaneled juror who had a panic attack due to feeling claustrophobic in my jury room. This is not an issue she has in her daily life, but the confines of a small room without windows with 13 other people was not something she could manage.

In four of our courtrooms, the gallery seats, which is where jurors sit during jury selection, are old theater seats that are difficult to get in and out of for able bodied people. For people with any physical limitations or just general age, getting in and out can require physical assistance.

Beyond these very serious issues, there are also additional practical issues. There are courtrooms designed for district court, which only had six person juries, being used for multi-week felony trials. This means we must place chairs in front of the jury box. In these courtrooms, which I occupied one, the witnesses and the defendant must walk by the jurors within inches to reach the witness stand. In one trial I had a Deputy District Attorney take out an axe which the handle had come off and when she placed it on the only surface it could go, the handle fell and hit a juror's foot because the courtroom is so small.

Outside our courtrooms, in custody defendants walk down the same hallways as witnesses and victims. There is no secure way to move a defendant to many of the courtrooms here in Washington County. Many times, victims waiting in the hallway observe their abusers, who can be either in or out of custody, pass them on their way in and out of the courtroom.

As the fastest growing and soon to be the county with the highest population, we need a courthouse that not only meets our needs now, which this current complex does not even come close to doing, but also a courthouse that is accessible, built in a manner that is trauma informed and meets our population's needs into the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brandon Thompson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Circuit Court Judge, Brandon Thompson