



By Judge Susan  
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# New Justice Center Needs Grassroots Support

This month I am mounting my soapbox to call attention to a cancer growing on the City of Seattle's body politic. The movement opposing construction of the Children and Family Justice Center is growing, especially in the wake of Ferguson. Its leaders are utilizing tactics calculated to intimidate anyone with a contrary view — be they neighbors who want to replace the existing eyesore or city councilmembers facing their first district re-election bids.

Those of us who worked to get the ballot measure passed — the KCBA helped lead the charge — need to reach out and assure members of the City Council that we will stand with them as they heed the will of the majority of voters, rather than fulfill the demands of a vocal group of 200 to 500 opponents.

In a previous column, I described being shouted down as a “racist” when I addressed the City Council's Land Use Committee about the need for minor amendments to the City's land use code to allow us to construct the new, voter-approved Children and Family Justice Center. Despite the tone of last fall's hearings, I was hopeful that the Court and King County Executive Dow Constantine would be able to demonstrate our commitment to reducing racial disproportionality in the juvenile justice system.

How naïve we were. We thought then that the opponents of the build-

ing shared that commitment. I am beginning to wonder if the opposition is more interested in organizing around a symbol — namely, stopping the building — than in the hard work required to address the root causes of racial disproportionality.

Sometimes opposition groups such as End the Prison Industrial Complex and Youth Undoing Institutional Racism sound as they though they believe that they are calling to the attention of community leaders the problem of racial disproportionality for the very first time. In fact, King County has been working to reduce disproportionality and use of detention for the past 15 years.

We were successful in driving down the absolute numbers of youth in detention — from well over 200 in the 1990s to just 42 yesterday. This is one of the lowest rates of incarceration of youth of any large urban jurisdiction in the country. While this means fewer youth of color are incarcerated, those youth who are in detention are disproportionately youth of color (more than 40 percent are African American, compared to 6 percent of King County's population).

It was clear to us that to make real inroads we would need to reach children earlier. As members of the KCBA well know, it has been our vision to create a Unified Family Court for over a decade; adding the fourth and fifth floors to the proposed facility would

enable us to provide to all families in crisis under one roof services ranging from food stamps to mental health referrals to parenting classes. We believe that being able to intervene early, when children are young, offers us the chance to ensure that they won't come back to court again until they serve as jurors.

This was the vision brought to the voters. Some 65 percent of Seattle voters (55 percent countywide), including all precincts in Southeast Seattle, approved the levy lid lift that is paying for the building. While public attention is now focused on disproportionality like never before, there is nothing to suggest that Seattle voters no longer believe in early intervention to keep children from becoming part of the juvenile justice system. Their recent support for the early learning initiative suggests quite the contrary.

And yet, we have begun to encounter resistance to a land use measure that would allow our building to be 85-feet tall to accommodate the fourth and fifth floors. The neighbors are delighted to see a building with a smaller footprint and a height in keeping with their plans for 12th Avenue.

We thought services for families would be universally appealing. But the opponents of the building apparently do not want services to be offered in the courthouse, because one should not have to go to court to get services. True enough, but once a youth is arrested or a mother loses a child to CPS or parents

split up, they need everything from referrals to Medicaid to mental health to enrollment in school. Families in crisis are more likely to get these things done and show up for appointments if they leave court with everything in hand, rather than being sent away with a list of agencies to call.

The Court's position is practical. The opponents' is philosophical. They argue that a racist juvenile justice system should be reflected in a decrepit building.

Surely a majority of voters still believe that some youth will always need to be detained as a matter of public safety. And certainly they still believe that early intervention in the lives of children is our best hope of keeping them out of trouble in the future by providing the services they need when they are young and throughout their lives.

I, for one, am confident that voters want to show respect to youth and families by welcoming them to a modern building designed to reduce stress, with light, heat and potable water, not to mention a day care center, a café and a place to change diapers. None of this is available at the existing Youth Services Center.

Please urge the City Council to stand strong against the loud, well-organized groups trying to thwart the will of the voters. They will not be punished at the ballot box for adhering to the will of the people of Seattle and King County. ■