

Public Comment to the Board of Supervisors

Supervisors,

I would normally have appeared before you in person, but my city council meeting this afternoon conflicts with the Board Meeting.

The current debate over finding alternatives to incarceration is appropriate and long overdue. The incarceration of low-level offenders, particularly for drug related offenses, has resulted in destroyed communities, lost lives, and exorbitant costs. No law enforcement official, particularly in this county has argued to the contrary in quite some time.

Santa Barbara County has labored for several years to develop alternatives to incarceration. The Criminal Justice Mapping project, started in early 2019, focused on mapping the criminal justice “freeway” from detention to final sentencing with an eye on identifying and/or creating off-ramps out of the system. As has been pointed out, the Average Daily Population (ADP) has been steadily declining since 2015.

This trend has been amplified by the pandemic due to several factors including Zero Bail and decisions made by the police departments in the county to not transport people to jail. While this keeps people out of custody, it does not address the social problems that brought many of these people to the attention of law enforcement. It also does not consider the number of people (more than 2500) who have been cited and who have court cases pending. It is entirely predictable that a high percentage of these will ultimately be sentenced to some time in jail.

As the police chief for Santa Barbara as well as someone who has spent nearly 50 years working in the criminal justice system I would urge you to make a distinction between ADP and the capacity of the jail. Giving up capacity in the jail is not something that you will ever get back. If the experience of the last 20 years has taught us nothing else, it has shown us that crime rates rise and fall, and social mandates do the same. The consequences of maintaining an undersized jail which produced the travesty of people sleeping on floors and ongoing litigation should serve as a stark reminder that we need to maintain capacity, regardless of current usage.

Law enforcement officers deal with the social issues that are put in front of them. They are tasked with attempting to solve problems that the community is demanding be addressed. All of us agree that we need to have facilities where we can take people who are experiencing mental illness and/or who are struggling with substance abuse and addiction. It is possible under the right set of circumstances the current jail could be repurposed to that end. But the space needs to be there. You can work to control ADP, and by extension costs, without reducing capacity.

Thank you for giving this consideration,

B.K. Melekian

Bernard Melekian
Chief of Police, Santa Barbara