

A closer look at King County executive's big Seattle development proposal

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Shaun Martin | PSBJ

King County Executive Dow Constantine announced a proposal to redevelop the county's downtown Seattle campus into a mix of uses, including public and private offices, residences, shops and public gathering places.

King County Executive Dow Constantine floated a very big trial balloon last week during his State of the County address: the Civic Campus Initiative.

It would redevelop the county's seven-block Seattle campus around the courthouse, which he thinks should be reconfigured to face the park to the south as it did before a 1960s modernization project.

Elsewhere he envisions a dense, mixed-use neighborhood with a light rail station along the new Ballard extension tunnel, which will be parallel to the existing transit tunnel.

"I don't think there's any way that you can do this without a public-private partnership," he said in an interview.

It's a heavy lift and already is getting pushback with transit advocates blasting Constantine's plan to have Sound Transit site the new rail station on the Administration Building block instead of in the Chinatown-International District.

The CID transfer point is closer to other transit modes at King Street and Union stations five blocks south of the courthouse.

Constantine said siting the underground rail station on the Administration Building site could set the groundwork for the new development above.

Some transit advocates disagree.

"Locating the new light rail station at the admin building location cripples the system that's being created from ever being useful for half the county on top of breaking yet another promise to the CID and voters in general," one critic tweeted.

Constantine says there's not a huge difference in transfer distances. In the CID, transit riders would transfer underground from the Fourth Avenue side of Union Station up to street level and back down to the existing station on Fifth Avenue.

"There's a lot of misunderstanding about the transfer opportunities up and down the line," Constantine said.

Riders coming from the south end will be able to transfer between the existing and new lines at a number of locations like the Sodo and Stadium stations.

This would, however, reduce foot traffic for CID businesses and travel times would be longer for those traveling beyond the CID to the courthouse area to transfer. But there, passengers would have access to all points in the system, he said.

The CID station would be up to \$700 million more expensive to build than a courthouse station, "so you're getting little or no additional utility and paying a very large price for that," said Constantine.

It's a complicated puzzle with big questions to answer, like where a new jail might be built.

"We can't just continue doing nothing. The courthouse can't last that much longer. The Administration Building can't sit empty. These are huge things that you just have to confront at some point," Constantine said.

He called that "a critical public policy question" and noted the county is legally obligated by state law to provide detention services. The decision needs to be informed by 21st-century values, including mental health and addiction treatment.

The middle of one of the most expensive downtowns in the country is not the smartest place to have a jail, Constantine said "it adds nothing to the fabric of the city."

Serious conversations with the county's justice system partners are needed, he said.

"My goal is for us to get this stuff on the table and actually have those conversations rather than just to muddle along and end up with a result that is less than what it could have been," he said.

Next up is forming an advisory group with representatives from business, social service and community development groups as well as county employees to discuss what they want to see in this new district in downtown Seattle.

No meeting date has been set, a Constantine spokesperson said.