

THE ISLANDS' SOUNDER

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Viking sports coverage

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Orcas celebrates homecoming



Colleen Smith/staff photo

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County considers radio upgrade funds

by Mandi Johnson
Journal editor

Voters may see a request for an increase in sales tax on the ballot early next year to fund upgrading the county's emergency radio system.

"This conversation is not a new conversation, it's been going on for a number of years," County Manager Mike Thomas told council during its regular meeting on Oct. 22. "We're budgeting, so it's the perfect time to talk about a new radio system."

Thomas' proposition is to have an emergency communications sales tax of 0.2 percent to fund the project that is expected to cost around \$3.1 million. The tax would generate approximately \$1 million annually, Thomas added.

"At that amount, we would pay for the system and finance charges within five years," Thomas said. "The beauty of the sales tax — since it's a countywide sales tax — is it would pay for the cost of the system for all agencies that participate."

The council has until Dec. 31 to agree to move forward with sending the tax to the public for a vote, Thomas explained. The simple majority vote could be done

at any election, he continued, but the next available election is Feb. 11. The tax would begin collecting in April or May.

"I think that this is a great tax. It's a tax that is made exactly for this," County Auditor F. Milene Henley said, who explained that after the tax has paid for the capital costs it could be reduced to 0.1 percent to cover maintenance. "It's a tax that would go into a separate fund so that it would have full transparency. The public would have no question of how it's being used. I think it's a good opportunity."

If the sales tax failed to receive enough affirmative votes, each agency would need to find a way in its budget to pay for its share of the cost, Thomas explained. If that were the case, public works would not be able to afford its share, he added.

"I don't think there's any scenario where they could craft funds out of it. We have scrubbed that budget to death," Thomas said. "To lay an expenditure in there related to the radio system, I don't think is possible."

To pull public works out of the equation would save \$500-to-600 thousand, Thomas said. Council

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Life Flight joins county medevac providers

by Mandi Johnson
Journal editor

There's a new air ambulance provider servicing the San Juan Islands — Life Flight Network.

In July, Life Flight Network announced it was teaming up with WhidbeyHealth Medical Center to open a base on Whidbey Island. On Sept. 15, that base began servicing Island County and, "the broader Puget Sound region," including the San Juan Islands.

"If there was an emergency in the community, they could definitely call us and we would respond," Life Flight Regional Vice President Jacob Dalstra said.

The new location is home to a 24/7 air medical helicopter, pilot and medical crew, according to a July press release. The not-for-profit air ambulance provider opened a Port Angeles base in February. Life Flight Network is the largest nonprofit air medical services in the United States, a July release stated.

"Demand is growing and the relationship

with the local EMS community is strong," the July press release said of its Port Angeles operations.

With the addition of Life Flight's second Puget Sound base, there are a total of four helicopter air ambulances covering the region — Airlift Northwest in Arlington and Bellingham; and Life Flight in Coupeville and Port Angeles. The new Coupeville base is fewer than five miles closer to Lopez and San Juan than Airlift Northwest's Bellingham base. For Orcas, Airlift Northwest's Bellingham base is a much closer option — nearly 15 miles — than Life Flight.

Orcas Island Fire and Rescue Chief Scott Williams said the island emergency services are still in the early stages of learning about Life Flight's island coverage. He added that for now, OIFR will continue to use Airlift Northwest and Island Air Ambulance as primary providers, as well as the U.S. Coast Guard and Navy when needed, unless additional assistance is needed from Life Flight for whatever reason.

According to Dalstra, the organization has

a reciprocal agreement with Airlift Northwest which ensures that if a patient has a membership with one provider and gets service from the other, they incur no out-of-pocket expense. Life Flight Network offers an annual membership for \$65 and Airlift Northwest offers an annual membership for \$79.

Airlift Northwest representative Susan Gregg told the Sounder, "AirCare members of Airlift Northwest, which has been serving the residents of the Islands with a higher level of healthcare for nearly 40 years, are covered if transported by one of our reciprocal partners."

Those partners are Life Flight Network in Oregon, Idaho and Montana; Care Flight in Reno, Nevada; and Air St. Luke's in Boise, Idaho.

Locally owned and operated Island Air Ambulance offers a fixed-wing (airplane) medical flight option. It, too, offers a membership for \$39 to ensure no out-of-pocket costs for the patient.