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# LA CONNER WEEKLY NEWS

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**STEPPING INTO HER FUTURE** – Yareli Lopez graduated in real time with her 32 fellow La Conner high school seniors Thursday. The one-at-a-time ceremony was also one of a kind: the graduates stepped out of their cars, walked up the steps of the Landy James Gym and received their diplomas. Honks abounded, as graduates-to-be and family members watched and waited from their cars in the school parking lot.

– Photo by Ken Stern



**GROUND CONTROL** – The Swinomish canoe "Little Salmon" was no mere fish out of water last Wednesday. Mounted on a trailer and pulled by a pickup, the sleek canoe joined a long vehicle parade launched from John K. Bob Ballpark that honored this year's Swinomish high school and college graduates. Drive-thru events replaced traditional commencement celebrations in the La Conner area in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

– Photo by Bill Reynolds

## La Conner High seniors show drive during revised graduation week

By Bill Reynolds

The 126th annual La Conner High graduation ceremonies were truly the first of their kind.

With the COVID-19 pandemic having nixed traditional indoor commencement exercises marked by large crowds, celebratory music, tossed mortar boards and release of balloons and confetti, the school's Class of 2020 still wasn't denied fanfare.

La Conner High seniors were honored Thursday evening with a drive-thru graduation event outside Landy James Gym followed by a car parade through town led by firefighting and emergency services vehicles with horns blaring and sirens blazing.

Prior to the festivities, the public was able to access on phones and electronic devices student graduation speeches and the announcement of awards and scholarships pre-recorded and arranged by La Conner Schools Technology Director Ryan Hiller.

Hiller's behind the scenes work didn't go unnoticed.

"Ryan has been amazing in making this tech magic happen," said La Conner Schools Superintendent Dr. Whitney Meissner, who joined school counselor Lori Buher and school board president Susie Gardner Deyo in presenting seniors their diplomas on the northwest landing of

the gymnasium.

"Ryan did an incredible amount of work," Buher said Thursday morning, "to record and produce a celebration honoring those students who received awards as well as today's event."

The awards and scholarships segment, always among the highlights of commencement, was presented virtually the Tuesday prior to graduation.

La Conner High Principal Todd Torgeson praised Hiller for seamlessly weaving together different components within the virtual segments of this year's ceremony.

"He really got into the planning of all of it," Torgeson said. "One of the things he did was use multiple cameras with different angles. It was all pretty amazing because this is something we hadn't done before."

Because the La Conner campus, like others across the state, has been closed since March due to the virus crisis, spectators other than immediate family members and guests were not able to view the diploma presentations.

And those present had to do so from within their vehicles or standing or sitting in the parking lot or street.

Again, Hiller had an answer. He was able to livestream the ceremony on a YouTube channel.

In addition, Weekly News contributor Sarah Walls volunteered to take photographs of all

the graduates with diplomas in hand.

The car parade that followed was greeted by well-wishers who gathered not just downtown but along the entire route.

"Sixth Street was fun, too," La Conner resident Rick Dole said afterward. "A couple dozen folks turned out to cheer them on."

People began milling about at the intersection of First and Morris a half hour before the vintage 1941 white La Conner fire truck arrived at the head of the parade.

Many of the graduates captured the festive scene by shooting their own videos while riding in the serpentine.

The tone had been set the day before when Swinomish honored tribal high school and college graduates with a car parade starting at John K. Bob Ball Park. Tribal members and employees lined streets in Swinomish Village to support the graduates.

"It was an absolutely joyful experience," said Meissner, who was among the participants.

Others agreed.

"It was amazing," said Katie Bassford of the Swinomish Youth Center. "I love how everyone was involved. It should definitely be a yearly event."

Hopefully as part of future graduation weeks anchored by indoor commencements.

## Town Council measure makes masks mandatory in stores

By Bill Reynolds

Expect to see more masked men – and women – in La Conner when they step inside stores, to eat or reserve their lodging.

The Town Council last week unanimously adopted a resolution requiring persons entering stores or unable to maintain six-foot social distancing outside to wear masks while here.

La Conner is no Lone Ranger when it comes to mandating use of masks to stem spread of the coronavirus.

The Town is drawing upon mask requirement language previously enacted in Langley on south Whidbey Island, a similar sized community to La Conner and which is also a popular draw among tourists.

Still, the Town has no plans to deploy fashion police to nab those not wearing masks where required.

"This is less about enforcement," Mayor Ramon Hayes told Council members during their June 9 tele-conferenced meeting. "It's more about what we can do to encourage people to comply."

The public's health provided the impetus to pass the resolution, Town officials said.

"I'm concerned about the safety of our shop owners and their staff," said Council member Mary Wohleb. "I'm for anything we can do to support them."

Wohleb said that by passing a formal resolution, the Town removes the burden of compliance from merchants and business owners.

"We can make a resolution to require masks that protects businesses and allows them to point to the Town and say we're the heavies," she explained.

The Council action followed a busy weekend in town.

First Street was filled with people enjoying sunny weather following Skagit County's much anticipated entry June 5 into Phase 2 of the state's COVID-19 Safe Start plan. La Conner Planning Commission member Marna Hanneman noted that social distancing was near impossible to maintain downtown.

Upon her suggestion, the Council is now studying whether to close First Street to traffic over the July 4th weekend, which despite cancellation of the annual fireworks show is still expected to attract throngs of visitors.

All are agreed such a move would require a delicate balancing act.

"I know right now," Hanneman stressed, "that we want our business people to be successful."

But a temporary street closure, she noted, could prove beneficial on both the public health and business sides, creating a weekend walking plaza for shoppers.

"Leavenworth has done it," Hanneman said, "and I know it's been successful."

Council member John Leaver is conducting a survey on social media to determine the level of local support for a temporary street closure.

Town Public Works Director Brian Lease recalled when First Street was closed for the Smelt Derby and limited to one-way traffic during the Tulip Festival. A weekend closure is doable though "a lot of signage is required," he said.

In related notes:

- Director Heather Carter said the La Conner Chamber of Commerce move to the Fireside Room at Maple Hall, in response to COVID-related economic factors, has gone well. "It's a little cozy," she noted, alluding to the smaller office space, "but we're starting to get steady calls daily on the status of La Conner." See story page 5.

- Hayes predicted financial reports addressing the impact of declining Town revenues linked to COVID-19 will turn bleak in the weeks ahead. "Prepare for the next couple months," he said. "That's when you'll probably see the real downturn."

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## Getting to Phase 3 in Skagit County

By Ken Stern

Now that Skagit County is near the end of its second week in Phase 2 of Gov. Jay Inslee's Safe Start Plan for reopening Washington's counties and economies during the COVID-19 pandemic, what is the path to advance to Phase 3?

Most of the county's retail, service and manufacturing sectors are open at limited capacity under state guidances.

The Skagit County commissioners can apply to the secretary of Health to move to Phase 3 on June 24. The three week period allows a complete disease incubation period and an additional week to compile complete data and confirm trends.

The application will assess the progress of the County in five metrics the state is tracking for tackling the pandemic: COVID-19 activity, testing, healthcare system readiness, case investigations and contact tracing, and the protection of populations at higher risk.

Skagit County met all five metrics for the two week period ending June 13 as shown on the Washington Department of Health's risk assessment dashboard.

The 19 cases are fewer than 25 per 100,000 population. The 149 people tested for each new case reported is greater than the goal of 50. The 0.7% of individuals testing positive for COVID-19 during the past week beat the 2% goal. For hospital bed capacity, the availability of licensed hospital beds for all patients and those with COVID-19 exceeds the state metrics.

Skagit County's more current data on its Public Health Department website lists 23 cases from May 31-June 13. Eight cases were diagnosed from June 7-13.

The metric goals are targets, not hardline measures, according to the Washington State Department of Health website, and are to be considered in whole for reducing risk of disease transmission.

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