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NATALIA BLANCHETTE PHOTO

Priscilla Schleigh, Julie Speidel and Allison Reid outside of Giraffe, modeling necklaces made by Speidel to support Giraffe and benefit Vashon Center for the Arts.

Art as a Badge of Positivity

BY JULI GOETZ MORSE
For The Beachcomber

When an idea comes to long-time islander and internationally acclaimed artist Julie Speidel, it doesn't take long before she manifests that vision.

She began her most recent project — necklaces created using the Japanese Shou Sugi Ban wood-burning technique — in March, at the start of the pandemic. They are now being sold at Giraffe, on Vashon, as a piece of wearable art. "We can blame the virus,"

Speidel said, with a touch of humor in her voice. "Making necklaces is something wonderful to do during this time."

Wonderful indeed, but the project also includes a greater purpose. Money, she said, is not the motivating factor here, rather

it is to "do good in the world." That good includes a collaboration with Giraffe, which like most island businesses took a financial hit these past months, and a donation to Vashon Center for the

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N95 Mask-Maker Coming to K2 site? Maybe.

BY ELIZABETH SHEPHERD
arts@vashonbeachcomber.com

The owners of the former K2 manufacturing site might be moving closer to signing a tenant.

The property, which includes a 180,000-square-foot building and surrounding 17 acres, was purchased in 2018 by Sound Properties, LLC, of which islander Brad Middling is a partner. So far under the new ownership, the building has not had a major tenant.

But last week, a press release written by Maskco Technologies, Inc., which manufactures N95 and surgical masks, said that as part of an expansion of its operations, the company expected to open a facility on Vashon at the K2 site in Aug. 2021.

The press release, dated Nov. 11, was published on the website of 69 WFMZ-TV, a virtual television station in Allentown, Pennsylvania, and subsequently found its way onto at least one islander's Facebook page, where some islanders cheered the news.

However, according to Middling's business partner, Mike Kirkland, a deal has not yet been sealed with Maskco, though talks with the business are in progress.

Kirkland's company, MK Property Services, is in charge of leasing and marketing for the property.

"I haven't signed anything yet, but we're in discussion," Kirkland said, when reached by phone by The Beachcomber. He added that he was also in discussions with other potential tenants as well.

According to its press release, Maskco, founded in April 2020, has recently formed a strategic manufacturing partnership and investment with Gredale, LLC, a Los Angeles-based manufacturer and distributor of personal protection equipment and textiles used to manufacture personal protection equipment.

Under the terms of the partnership, the companies also plan to have production facilities in Los Angeles, California and Jacksonville, Texas, with a goal of

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Health Care District Passes Budget, Putting Parks at Risk

BY PAUL ROWLEY
prowley@vashonbeachcomber.com

Commissioners of The Vashon Health Care District approved a \$2.23 million budget for 2021 last Wednesday, accounting for their expenses and working toward targeted goals but simultaneously jeopardizing the island's park and recreation services.

In 2021, the health care district will collect \$1.9 million in tax revenue that will be used to fund operations and keep the district sustainable by implementing a

property tax levy of \$.58 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value.

The health care district's budget accounts for the superintendent's salary, an hourly administrative director, advertising costs, a \$1.5 million subsidy granted to the island's new primary care provider, Sea Mar Community Health Centers, and assumes further borrowing anticipated for 2021 in the amount of \$250,000.

The budget was decided against the backdrop of a pandemic that changed health care around the country and was responsible for significantly limiting the district's search for providers that could have replaced outgoing Neighborhood Health at the Sunrise Ridge Clinic.

The commissioners said that their choice of the levy rate was informed by a variety of factors and was not made lightly. It will curtail the Vashon Park District's \$1.5 million budget,

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Pandemic Prompts Nature Center to Make Sure 'Everyone Counts'

BY SUSAN McCABE
For Vashon Island School District

Humans have proven throughout time that adversity motivates creativity, and Vashon Nature Center's (VNC) Everyone Counts! program is yet another example of the invention a crisis can stimulate.

At the time the pandemic struck, VNC was in the middle of launching a hands-on science project with the schools. So, the organization was ready to spring into action when Vashon Island School District (VISD) School Superintendent Slade McSheehy reached out to local groups and educators in search of ways to support teachers during distance learning.

"We started figuring out how we could pivot to online schooling and still get these kids outside," said VNC founder and director Bianca Perla.

From that challenge, Everyone

Counts was born.

Critical support for the program's \$20,000 budget this year came from the Vashon Schools Foundation, a PIE Scientists in Schools grant, a King County Service Area grant, the Russell Family Foundation and individual donations.

VNC officially launched Everyone Counts on Sept. 24, three weeks into the school year. In the program's 12 weeks, every session starts with a video prompt to create a theme for the week — when members of the VNC team introduce an idea like "Your Senses are your Superpowers."

The program offers a grounding exercise, created by guest expert Andra DeVoght — a beginning especially designed for children who spend their days connected to screens in distance learning. Participants use a VNC data sheet customized to that week's theme to record their observations from the weather, to the wind direction,

to their feelings at the start of their 20-minute "sit spot" session and then again at the end.

While the course is self-paced, each weekly theme builds on prior sessions to encourage a deeper connection to nature through sensual observation, moving through discoveries to foster enthusiasm for scientific observation and recording. In one session, for instance, students learn — in English and Spanish — how different species experience sound and how they use it to survive. Another session points out patterns in Nature.

Everyone Counts! is cleverly designed to employ sensual and scientific observation along with varied methods of recording. Coached by VNC Field Guide Adrian Swain, participants draw plots and sound maps to hone their listening skills, with guidance from nature artist Annie

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HAPPENING

Vashon Senior Center Gets Funding

The King County Council allocated \$1.5 million to be distributed equally to 13 senior centers that did not receive long-term support for senior hubs in the two-year King County budget approved last week. Councilmember Joe McDermott, who represents Vashon, was able to secure funding to help continue programs for seniors in the region,

and so the Vashon-Maury Senior Center and Sound Generations - Senior Center of West Seattle will each receive \$115,385.

McDermott was also pivotal in securing \$2 million in the budget for the continued rehabilitation for Dockton Park.

Water Taxi Not in Service Thursday, Friday

The King County Water Taxi's West Seattle and Vashon Island routes will not be in service on Thursday, Nov. 26 or Friday, Nov. 27, for Thanksgiving. Both routes return to full commuter service on Monday, Nov. 30.

For the water taxi's sailing schedule, visit the Water Taxi homepage online at tinyurl.com/y3oycujn.

In order to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, physical distancing passenger limits remain in effect aboard the water taxi, limiting capacity on the Sally Fox and Doc Maynard to 86 passengers, and aboard the Spirit of Kingston to 33. Current ridership has been below these thresholds.

The water taxi continues to prevent the spread of COVID-19 through regular cleaning and disinfecting between sailings. Masks are currently required for both passengers and crew.

Care

From Page 1

slashing it by 9%, a loss of \$132,000 coming next year.

Many in the community feared this scenario, in which the park district would be forced to compromise itself for the health care district after commissioners set their levy rate, given the minimum headroom left under the state-imposed cap of \$5.90 per \$1,000 assessed value.

Under Washington law, the combined levy limit for cities, counties and most special districts is \$5.90 per \$1,000 of assessed value. Should that limit be exceeded, so-called "junior" taxing districts would see reductions to their levy rates. For Vashon, the park district is the first to be affected and will lose tax revenue.

Health care district commissioners have weighed several options over the last month as they considered what levy rate to implement to fund the district. Initially, they considered a draft budget with \$.52 cents per \$1,000 but, prior to the public hearing on the budget held last month, a revised draft budget proposing \$.54 cents was released, still within the \$5.90 limit according to the commissioners.

The meeting on Wednesday was the first time that commissioners had addressed a \$.58 cent levy. Under Washington state law, hospital districts have the capacity to levy up to \$.75 cents per \$1,000 of assessed home value.

At the meeting, superintendent Eric Jensen presented a series of budget scenarios to the commissioners prior to their adoption of the \$.58 cent levy, which would make the district viable in 2021, raising \$132,000 more in property tax revenue than the district would have been able to collect by levying \$.54 cents per \$1,000 as proposed earlier.

A \$.58 cent levy will allow the district to adequately cover negative cash flow in the first quarter of 2022. That amount will also mean the district's year-end cash balance will be significantly greater than it would be under a \$.54 cent levy.

In the best circumstances, with practically no surprises coming down the pipeline, a \$.54 cent levy would still eventually leave the district overdrawn with a negative low monthly cash balance of -\$114, compared to a \$.58 cent levy, which will provide the district with a comfortable \$45,000 low monthly cash balance.

The district will also be able to pay off some of its remaining interfund loan balance to King County with the \$.58 cent levy rate.

Under the two other

budget scenarios Jensen presented, with both set at a \$.54 cent levy and providing for debt reduction and debt service, the low monthly cash balance fell well below zero, the year-end cash balance was reduced, and the district remained financially vulnerable. Jensen supported the \$.58 cent levy to support the district.

Board president Tom Langland set aside ample time for the commissioners to share their thoughts about the \$.58 cent levy before proceeding with a final vote.

"This is stuff we're talking about that affects each and every one of our neighbors on the island one way or another," he said.

The commissioners were all in agreement that the extraordinary and unanticipated difficulties related to the pandemic that they encountered in their first year serving on the new board were responsible for pushing the district in this direction. Don Wolczko, who supported the levy, started by saying that he felt that the board had a responsibility to bring affordable, high-quality primary care to Vashon and that this was the only way to do it.

"I think we need to make ourselves whole; we need to have enough tax revenue so that we're not in another deficit even for a couple of months in the year and looking for money from the county, assuming that it's going to lend us some more money," he said.

The higher levy rate was also supported by Commissioner Wendy Noble. She cited the dramatic impact of the pandemic on the health care sector, in addition to other misfortunes caused by bad luck this year, such as the loss of the West Seattle Bridge, exacerbating the island's transportation challenges, and potentially leaving islanders in the lurch when it comes to accessing outpatient services and off-island care.

She added her belief that it is critical the district is able to guarantee that it can support the clinic without going into more debt.

Noble mentioned the Vashon Island Fire District's intent to raise its levy rate in 2021 to \$1.50 per \$1,000 of assessed value, an increase over this year's tax rate of \$1.47, though a final public hearing is scheduled after press time for 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 25 on Zoom. She added her hope that there is an understanding among the boards of the island's other taxing districts that they and VIFD deserve to be the priority, especially given the urgency of the pandemic.

"I have great respect for

how the parks are affected by this [budget]. [But] the trails, the fields, they're not affected by this crisis," she said.

Before the vote, Langland, for his part, acknowledged that the commissioners were struggling with the decision, noting that the problems they have faced included the high cost of keeping Neighborcare open long enough to attract a new provider while retaining the nurses and doctors who work there.

Citing his business background, he said there were too many unknowns to endorse another lower levy rate, adding that \$.58 cents is "not exactly proposing a fat cat budget for the health-care district." The forecasts of the commissioners on debt service coverage and the clinic subsidy changed significantly from only a year earlier, underlined, he said, by the volatile impact of COVID-19.

"And so I am asking for some consideration by the other junior taxing districts affected, the parks, namely, that they partner with us, that they shoulder a part of this unknown disaster that we really can't afford to let threaten health care," he said, noting that the park district is debt-free and presently financially secure.

He also commented on the park district's loss of 9% of its budget.

"That hurts, that's big, they're going to have to get creative if we pass this levy rate. But I don't think it varies the part. I'm sorry for the damage it does. I love the parks, my grandchildren do, blah, blah, blah, they are a huge part of Vashon life. But I don't think this is in any way a death sentence for the parks," he said. "They're going to have to get nimble; they might have to go to the county borrowing pool short term, like we did, to make themselves whole if we pass this."

Hans Van Dusen, chair of the park district, did not agree, speaking during the public comment period. Acknowledging the efforts of the commissioners to set up the health care district, he said that the parks would not be able to comfortably withstand the blow that they had decided to inflict upon it.

It's significant. The park

district's budget has been leaned down, it's quite trim. We've held back wage increases for the employees to make it work. We've deferred maintenance. We're pretty bare-bones right now," he said, adding that he believes the two districts are aligned in outcomes of public health, with recreation programming, fields and pools helping islanders stay well.

Van Dusen said based on the figures shared at the meeting he believed the health care district had a narrow financial path forward without having to opt for the higher levy. He reminded the commissioners that in the last election nearly 80% of the island voted for the park district to be funded.

"There is not \$130,000 to cut from the parks district budget," he said.

Not everyone on the Health Care District Board came to the same conclusion as to whether or not to accept the levy. Commissioner Eric Pryne said he was hesitant to surpass the \$5.90 limit, concerned by what repercussions it might have for the board's relationships in the community. He also said that because the district more or less endorsed the narrative that the park district would stay untouched with a vote for the health care district, the board would lose credibility.

"We got a 70% 'yes' vote and mandate, but at the same election, voters gave the park district levy an 80% 'yes' vote. And it's clear that the community values both," he said, adding that there were other options for reducing the district's debt service and that a conversation about potentially reducing the large subsidy to Sea Mar could begin next fall.

"For me, at least, the disadvantages of a higher levy rate outweigh the advantages," Pryne said. He was the only member of the board to vote against

the budget.

The health care district was formed with 70% voter approval during the 2019 November general election. Sharon Nelson and Gary A. Koch wrote the statement in favor of the measure, saying that the district would sustain Vashon health services with local funds needed to build and support long-term continuity in health care operations and facilities.

But the impact of the health care district has long been a point of contention for those who opposed it in the first place, with some claiming last year that it would put Vashon parks at risk.

The opposition statement in the voter pamphlet against establishing King County Public Hospital District No. 5, submitted at that time by islander Hilary Emmer, noted that the health care district levy "will also decimate the Park District budget."

The issue was addressed in the rebuttal.

"Parks vs. Healthcare is a false choice. Strong communities have both, which is why levy rates will be modest, and ultimately accountable to taxpayers," read the statement.

On the ballot simultaneously, the park district ran and later passed a \$.45 cent levy — the equivalent of less than \$19 per month for a \$500,000 property — to fund the district from 2020 to 2023, after voters rejected a \$.50 cent levy earlier in 2019.

The dilemma for the park district is greater than just the health district going ahead with a higher levy. Increased property values have usually contributed to steady or decreasing tax rates in the county, preventing any problems with the \$5.90 ceiling. But Vashon's median home prices have fallen by 2.2% and, as property values decline, taxing districts need to increase their rates to generate the

same amount of revenue.

This is why the fire district is also seeking a tax raise again. As the island's total assessed value declines, even at the fire district's highest tax rate of \$1.50 per \$1,000 assessed value, it would see a decrease in property tax revenue for next year.

The fire district's new levy could mean an additional loss for the park district. Meanwhile, other special taxing districts in the county such as the King County Roads or the library system are said to be strongly considering raising their levy rate next year to keep up, all creating a greater likelihood that the island's park district could be prorated much further.

At the park district's Nov. 10 board meeting, executive director Elaine Ott-Rocheford shared that she was in communication with Rep. Joe Fitzgibbon, who last December proposed legislation to rewrite state tax law that would allow Washington's park and recreation districts to collect tax revenue beyond the "local district" limits required by state law. The bill did not go anywhere, but Ott-Rocheford said that Fitzgibbon is prepared in the legislature to force the bill forward.

The park district is not spared by the decrease of levy dollars relative to falling property values. Ott-Rocheford said reduced levy revenue, combined with the hit from prorating, will cut the district's budget by nearly 11%. Her recommendation to the board during their regular meeting, after press time at 7 p.m. Tuesday on Zoom, will be to preserve staffing while eliminating recreation programming and capital projects.

"Every district needs to do what they need to do. Certainly, we all understand that. But it's disappointing," she said.

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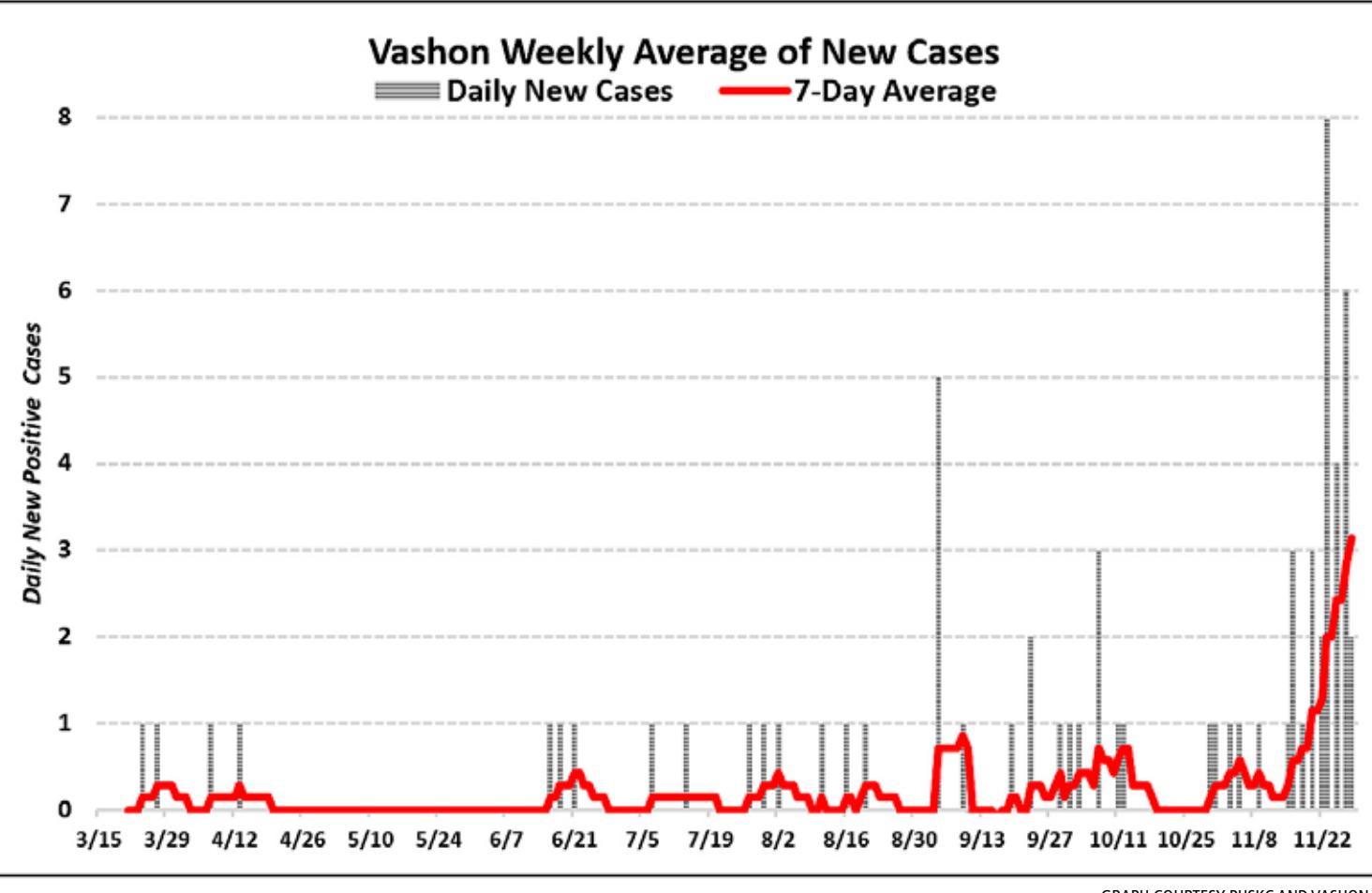
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THURSDAY, DECEMBER 3, 2020



This graph tells the story of Vashon's spike in cases that reached a new record peak in the Thanksgiving holiday week. That means COVID-19 has hit Vashon harder than at any time during the previous eight months of our emergency activation. In just one week, Vashon recorded about one-third of all its cases to date — 22 new cases out of the total of 64. That spike explains the nearly vertical line in this graph plotting the seven-day rolling average of all positive cases among Vashon residents with a red line, against the background of the rising day-to-day new cases.

As Boards Approve Budgets, Parks Faces Uncertainty

By PAUL ROWLEY
prowley@vashonbeachcomber.com

Last week, commissioners of the Vashon Island Fire District solemnly adopted a \$5.6 million budget for 2021, a spending plan 1.8% larger than this year's, which will allow the district to cover costs, buy an aid car and designate funds to reserve accounts.

After holding three public hearings in November, the fire district's final 2021 budget provides for several growing expenditures, with the largest including payroll, disaster preparedness work in collaboration with the island's Medical Reserve Corps, and facilities maintenance, identified by Chief Charlie Krimmert as being neglected for a long time.

Commissioners voted on their budget as islanders submitted comments

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Vashon Has Worst Pandemic Week So Far

Vashon Emergency Operations Center COVID-19 Pandemic Situation Report

Nov. 24 - Nov. 30, 2020

THE VIRUS

Vashon cases spiking: The number of Vashon residents infected by COVID-19 spiked dramatically over the Thanksgiving holiday week. There were 22 new positive tests recorded by Public Health — Seattle & King County (PHSKC) between Saturday, Nov. 21 and Sunday, Nov. 29. The new cases raise the Vashon total case count to 64 since record-keeping began in March, according to statistics from Public Health — Seattle & King County (PHSKC).

Vashon resident hospitalized: Public health confirmed this week that a Vashon resident has been hospitalized due to COVID-19, the second hospitalization from Vashon since the pandemic began. The first was back in April. It is important to point out that federal law and medical ethics require the utmost confidentiality to protect the privacy of patients. The people of Vashon will feel like helping the individual in some way but we cannot reveal the patient's identity.

PANDEMIC IMPACTS

Family and workplace sources: Most of the COVID-19 cases on Vashon have come from two directions: family or other social gatherings and worker-to-worker contacts. Even the cases related to out-of-state travel have involved family visits or workplace contacts that took place at the travel destination, after which residents brought

COVID-19 back to the island. "Unfortunately, once COVID-19 infects one member of a household, other members of the family often get sick," observed Dr. Zach Miller, volunteer infectious disease specialist on the Vashon Medical Reserve Corps team. "This can be quite difficult for a family. For example, we have had several cases in the past few weeks where one person got infected and most or even all of the family members ended up testing positive for COVID-19."

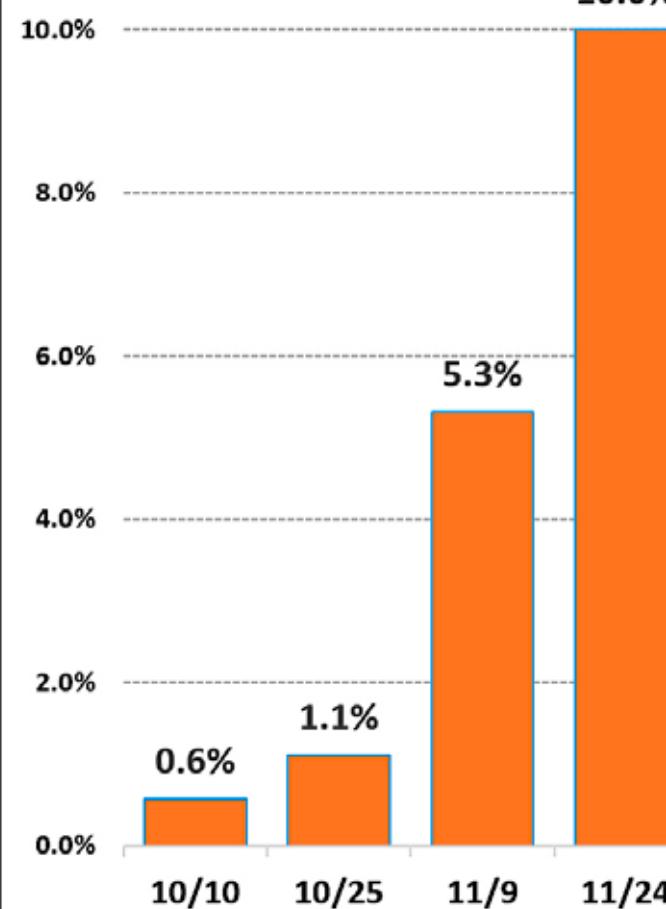
Please, a post-Thanksgiving appeal: The Vashon Medical Reserve Corps has issued a special appeal to families and friends who decided to get together for Thanksgiving. "No matter how careful you think you have been, the disease is now everywhere," warned Dr. Ina Oppiger, co-coordinator of the Vashon MRC. "If you gathered for Thanksgiving with anyone outside your household, please be extra cautious and consider that you may have been exposed. We are very concerned that the current spike in cases on Vashon may be merely the beginning. We may face an even bigger explosion of cases coming out of the holiday. The next 14 days will be crucial as we monitor the post-Thanksgiving incubation period."

School district nutrition program: The school district's food service operation has been disrupted due to a positive test for a staff member. It appears that the school breakfast and lunch program might be closed temporarily, but the Vashon Food Bank has stepped in to help fill the gap. Food will be available by going to the Vashon Island High School pick-up location during normal

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Vashon Positive Case Rate



Many people have asked if increased testing prior to Thanksgiving artificially inflated the number of cases discovered. A key number watched by experts is the positivity rate — the percentage of positive cases for a given number of tests. As this graph shows, the positive case rate has been rising sharply on Vashon during November. A rising positivity rate means COVID-19 is more and more common in the general population. In October, only about 1% of those tested had COVID-19. But by the end of November, one in ten of those tested were infected. (Note: The Nov. 24 column includes results only from the Vashon MRC testing site due to incomplete off-island test data from PHSKC.)

For Two Businesses, Exploding Pandemic Got Personal

By ELIZABETH SHEPHERD
arts@vashonbeachcomber.com

For Hedy Anderson and Paul Engels, the past weeks have been like none other, as they weathered the intrusion of an unwelcome intruder to their places of business — COVID-19.

On Monday, Anderson, the owner of the Sugar Shack, reopened the doors to her take-out eatery after a 14-day closure following a positive test result for a shift worker at the establishment.

And on Maury Island, Engels, of Engels Repair and Towing, is still in the first week of a temporary two-week shut-down of his family's iconic gas station following a staff member's positive test.

Both islanders — who are well-known about town and have devoted clienteles — have worked closely with Vashon's Medical Reserve Corps (MRC) and the Emergency Operations Committee (EOC), in follow-up to the incidents.

The EOC helped them

See SHOP, Page 4

HAPPENING

Small Business Grants

Gov. Jay Inslee has announced a third round of Working Washington Small Business grants for those impacted by the economic stresses of COVID-19.

These grants are prioritized for small businesses with annual revenues of \$5 million or less in 2019 and businesses in the sectors that are most impacted by the recent public health measures as well as businesses in sectors that have experienced significant, cumulative impacts. Examples include full-service restaurants, fitness centers, bowling alleys and music and event venues. The maximum award grant will be up to \$20,000. The grant can only cover expenses or costs incurred due to COVID-19 and that were necessary to continue business operations. Apply at tinyurl.com/y2v9jwvs.

Priority will be given to applications received by Dec. 10, 2020. If possible,

Commerce may also be able to consider applicants who submit after Dec. 10.

Community Council Finalizes Board

The VMICC board has filled the remaining two board positions, selecting Mariela Franco, the Human Resources, Resilient Vashon & Latino Outreach Director for Vashon Youth & Family Services, and Gavin Kovite, an educator at the Vashon Island School District.

Franco will assist the community council's efforts to connect with the island's Latino community. Kovite teaches Senior English, Freshman English, and AP Literature at Vashon Island High School, a valuable connection to the students and staff in the Vashon School District, and has expressed interest in connecting with old-time islanders who don't lean so far "left" to be sure their voices are also represented by the council.

The Vashon-Maury Island Community Council Board includes Kyle Britz, C. Hunter Davis, Diane Emerson, Mariela Franco, Dawn

Hylton, Gavin Kovite, Camille Reeves, Nicholas Simmons, and David S. Vogel.

At the next board meeting on Dec. 7, the council will elect officers including President, Vice-President, Clerk, Secretary, and Treasurer.

Styrofoam Event Cancelled

December's First Sunday Styrofoam Recycling Event has been cancelled due to the growing risk from the coronavirus pandemic to participants. Though safety precautions instituted earlier this year for the collection event have been helpful, organizers do not think that the risk is worth it to volunteers or our island recyclers.

Keep your eyes open for the new Vashon Styrofoam and Reluctant Recyclables Facebook page. It will be the best way to keep up with the schedule and the growing list of items that will be collected in January.

If you are interested in volunteering for this program, contact Jacquie Perry at jacquieperry@comcast.net. If you have any other questions about this program, email nadineedelstein.com.

Photo

From Page 3

Firstly, we have re-learned how much we like each other. Of course, there are times that each of the three of us needs our alone space — and we're sensitive to that for each other. But we maintain our daily routines, have meals together and talk a lot about gratitude. Our gratitude has increased dramatically, in

no small part because we moved to the island right before the pandemic.

The challenges and craziness of 2020 have given us nearly constant opportunities to have conversations with Phin about difficult topics. Beyond understanding that we're more privileged and fortunate than others across the country, we've talked about politics, climate change, community and state policy, and especially civil rights and

social justice. Our 8-year-old is becoming more aware of the world around and the things we feel are important.

What have been the biggest hurdles and challenges of 2020?

The biggest challenge, quite frankly, has been loneliness. Phin is very social and very active, and keeping him from interacting with other kids has been tough. We try to have virtual Face Time play dates often with friends

and cousins, but it has been hard for him. Like many families, another major challenge has been remote school. Again, we are more fortunate than many, in that we both work from home, but juggling a huge amount of e-learning work (given the state of online schooling now) and daily school schedules has not been easy. We were one of those families with the color-coded spreadsheet of school and daily activities in the first few

weeks. That has since been scaled back to our two-step plan to keep him alive and get him to class.

How have you talked with Phin about the pandemic?

We have had many conversations about why we can't have play dates, why we aren't going to school, why we didn't trick-or-treat, why we're not having Thanksgiving. And we've used these restrictions to reiterate that we're not only keeping

ourselves safe but also, our community and our family. This year will be a hell of a memory for him, once this pandemic has been overcome. The year the world paused.

What have you learned from him?

A fair amount of beginner Spanish. We've also learned that things are simpler than we frequently make them. We are getting by through talking frequently and openly and remaining calm.

Parks

From Page 1

and discussed the prospect that the Vashon Park District would begin to see significantly less tax revenue in the future now that two of the island's largest tax districts have set their respective levy rates, leaving no headroom remaining under the state-imposed limit of \$5.90 per \$1,000 assessed property value.

Under Washington law, the combined levy limit for cities, counties and most special districts is \$5.90 per \$1,000 of assessed value. Should that limit be exceeded, then "prorationing" is implemented and so-called "junior" taxing districts would see reductions to their levy rates. For Vashon, Parks is the first, and presently only district, to be affected, and will lose tax revenue.

Fire district commissioners stated that the pandemic and other economic factors justified the passage of their budget that some objected to as excessive in view of the impact that prorationing will have on the island's park and recreation services.

But with the approval of their budget, plus a higher-than-expected spending plan reaffirmed on the same evening at a special meeting of the Vashon Health District commissioners, the park district is due to lose a total of \$132,000 in tax revenue, about 9% of the district's budget. It was already running lean after voters rejected the district's \$.52 cent levy proposal last year before later approving a parks levy of \$.45 cents per \$1,000 assessed property value — amounting to \$1.5 million in levy revenue as part of a budget that commissioners renewed last week, unsure how else to proceed under the circumstances.

With prorationing, Park District Executive Director Elaine Ott-Rocheford said last week that the district's levy amount will be drawn down to \$1.35 million and, she said, that leaves the district unable to keep up with inflation in the years to come. Now the district faces uncertainty, with a chance of being prorated even further, as other special taxing districts in King County such as the roads division and library system are said to be considering

increasing their own levy rates in the months ahead to stave off their own financial challenges. And Ott-Rocheford warned the board that she fears the trouble won't end there.

"We're all hurting"

The fire district's 2021 budget will be the third since islanders voted several years ago to increase taxes for the fire department. The vote has allowed the district to increase its tax revenue by up to 6% a year for five years instead of the typical 1% to which taxing districts are typically limited. That boost has allowed the district to raise more money than it would have been able to otherwise.

The fire district expects to levy \$4.98 million in tax revenue next year. However, a sharp decline of the island's total assessed value means that even at the fire district's new, highest statutory tax rate of \$1.50 per \$1,000 assessed value — up from \$1.47 last year — the district will see a decrease in property tax revenue of a half percent, or approximately \$26,000 next year.

Vashon's assessed property values have declined in recent months, and taxing districts need to increase their rates to make up for the shortfall in order to generate the same amount of revenue. But the latest data from King County is drastic. It shows that the cumulative property value on the island has fallen by \$19 million since October, dropping by a whopping \$63 million since last year in the county's assessment.

One of the largest district costs is for union and personnel contract arrangements, which together account for more than 75% of the budget for 2021. But the district is still looking to hire more volunteers and both full and part-time employees, Krimmert told the board earlier last month, adding that his contract and that of Assistant Chief Bob Larson will expire in one year.

Other personnel-related expenditures for 2021 include a cost of living adjustment totaling \$95,000 more for all uniform firefighters and EMTs over last year and \$28,000 more for employees of the business office. Insurance, training and certain costs of equipment were also larger in next year's budget.

The new budget plans for the district to allocate \$475,000 for various

financial reserves that touch on the objectives of the administration and more from Vashon Island Fire & Rescue's fleet to services, equipment and personnel.

Some have suggested that the fire district is solvent enough to get by without having more funding, with the additional tax revenue it is already receiving. During one of the district's public hearings on the budget, one of the only meeting attendees, islander Scott Harvey, questioned why the voter-approved increase was still necessary, especially in light of the health care district's own levy proposal that he predicted would slash Parks' income.

"We all know that the hospital district is going to be coming up with a levy, a big levy, which is going to adversely affect a lot of people involved here," he said. "You have an opportunity right now to do what would be the proper thing, and in other words, not increase [the budget] by [6%] for the third year in a row, and to let the dust settle and see what happens as far as what's happening here."

Harvey recognized that the rocky financial condition of the district had improved greatly from only a few years ago, adding that the district had developed robust reserves since — enough, he said, to hold off and "still protect the property and the people and safety of everybody else in the island here, as we see how this hospital district thing plays out."

But at their final meeting, the board members claimed that the budget is tighter than it may seem and that the reserves were not padded, used routinely to replace major line items such as self-contained breathing apparatus for first responders as well as a new engine for one of the district's fire trucks.

Commissioners stayed on message and were prepared to address why else they chose to move ahead with the budget, with a few citing the specter of past long-standing financial mismanagement hanging over their decisions as an indication of a lack of previous accountability on the island they said were guarding against.

Candy McCullough, chair of the board, was the first to comment on the increasing cost of salaries and expenditures such as apparatus upgrades before the district's final vote on the budget, adding that certain

capital improvements at VIFR facilities have been postponed for too long.

"I don't think personally that we can afford to give up any of the potential revenue. We have to provide these things, we have to fix these things, so we can provide services," she said, adding that emails sent from community members to the board "painted us as the bad guys."

"It's painful for all of us. Nobody wants to hurt anyone," she said. "We're all hurting. But we all have to do what's right. And when it comes to life and safety, our money is still going to go down, but our expenses are going to go up. So we can't really afford to be the heroes and throw money back to the parks district at this point, from my perspective," she said.

Other board members added that it was not only in the fire district's best interest to pass the budget as drafted but imperative for the island.

But Hans Van Dusen, chairman of the Park District, attended the meeting and questioned that rhetoric, arguing that a tax increase would mean that Parks would have to forgo all the maintenance and preservation work it intended to do at the expense of the voters, from the community pool to the Tramp Harbor dock project, neglecting the island-wide facilities and assets owned by Parks that the fire district now protects.

"It's a painful trade-off. It wasn't either of our creation, for sure. But I just wanted to be clear on that, that you're going to make a choice to reduce the capital resources and operating resources of the parks district," Van Dusen said, asking the district to reconsider its budget even with only days before the final version was due to the county, on Nov. 30.

Ott-Rocheford, for her part, said that the fire district's tax increase alone reflects an estimated \$67,000 decrease in Parks' budget, calling it a large sum relative to the budget of the small organization compared to the fire district, worsened by the declining property valuation of the island that deepens Parks' loss.

Krimmert later said that the county data he had seen showed that the total assessed value on Vashon was projected to accelerate within a year or two and bounce back.

The discussion about the district's choice to continue

with the approval of the 2021 budget while deliberately affecting Parks turned to finger-pointing when Krimmert became notably frustrated after VIFR was criticized for not working with health and park district board members to reduce prorationing, following a question asked by Jennifer Bonaventura, a community member who said her husband was employed by Parks.

She referenced the fire district's willingness to reach out to Parks in 2017 upon passage of their expanded levy as concerns of prorating the park district were also raised then, while the health district was still the hope of representatives of the Vashon Health Care Collaborative.

"In 2017, we were all perceiving on the island that we were an immediate threat to the parks district based on the large sum of money we were asking for at the time," Krimmert said. "We did not partner at this time because simply, we understood the hospital district to have made a commitment that they would not ask for monies that would impact any junior taxing district up until [Nov.] 18, there was no intent to cause harm."

The fire district passed the 2021 budget 4-1, with commissioner David Hoffman abstaining.

"I feel uncomfortable. I don't want to vote yes or no," he said.

Health care commissioners press rewind, press ahead

As the fire district reflected and defended the budget the board put forth, the Vashon Health Care District commissioners held a special meeting at the same time, marking an effort that Board Chairman Tom Langland said was intended to increase the accountability of their recent deliberation process, which saw them introduce and approve a \$.58 per \$1,000 levy rate.

"We intend to acknowledge and atone for our process errors," he said, saying their deliberations happened too late and with little public notice or transparency, especially among the park district, he told that board at their own meeting the day before.

Langland added that it was the commissioners' wish to dispel notions that the district was being intentionally deceitful.

"I think I, along with a lot of my colleagues here as commissioners, have received a lot of mail. And most of them are very formative. But some of them suggest some sort of intentional, misleading activities. And I can assure you, there is no culture for that in this district," he said, admitting that early on, the board made comments only short of pledging to leave the park district alone which did not anticipate the numerous calamities that the COVID-19 pandemic had brought to health care and the district's formation efforts.

As part of the meeting, Superintendent Eric Jensen proposed an alternate budget option of \$.56 cents per \$1,000 of assessed value that would carry around \$66,000 less tax revenue to the health care district over the course of the year, with most commissioners expressing dissatisfaction over the low cash balance the levy provided in the first quarter of next year while still ending 2021 with an overall cash balance of \$305,000. The alternative levy choice would also have taken care of the district's debt service needs, arising from an inter-fund loan from the county the district obtained after agreeing to support beleaguered Neighborcare Health before the provider exited the island. Without that help, Neighborcare could have left Vashon without a primary care clinic for many years and coming later at a higher cost, Jensen said.

The proposed \$.56 cent levy also hurt the parks' bottom line, Ott-Rocheford said, swinging between both the fire and health care district's online meetings.

Public comment was largely critical of the health district's attempt to raise more than had been suggested at the outset. The commissioners heard each and responded before reaffirming their earlier vote for a \$.58 cents per \$1,000 value-assessed tax levy, with Eric Pryne, who voted against that levy resolution, also disapproving of the newly proposed option for similar reasons he had for opposing the district's final levy rate.

"We intend to acknowledge and atone for our process errors," he said, saying their deliberations happened too late and with little public notice or transparency, especially among the park district, he told that board at their own meeting the day before.

Langland added that it was the commissioners' wish to dispel notions that the district was being intentionally deceitful.



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SEE PAGES B1-B6

County Tax Increases Could Cost Island Tax Districts Everything

Spurred by Vashon Park District, a bill is revived to potentially shake up state tax law.

BY PAUL ROWLEY
prowley@vashonbeachcomber.com

The commissioners of Vashon's various local taxing districts have been looking ahead with some concern about the prospect of

larger, so-called "senior" taxing districts in King County asking residents to accept new tax increases.

If those measures were to pass now, a key source of revenue for some of the most important public services on the island would be gutted.

At the Dec. 16 meeting of the Health Care District, Commissioner Eric Pryne outlined what could happen if two of those senior districts, the King County Library System, and for unincorporated

areas, King County Roads, had been voter-approved in 2020 to raise their property tax levies to the statutory maximums allowed.

In short, this year, it would have implemented "prorating" on Vashon to such an extent that local, or "junior" taxing districts, would see massive reductions of their tax revenue, fully eliminating the Vashon Park and Flood Control Districts and also dramatically reducing the tax revenues of the Cemetery and Health Care

Districts.

"We need to make those organizations aware of the possible implications for us and see if there are workarounds," he told the board, adding that commissioners seriously considered what the issue could mean for the district's budget before they approved their levy rate in November.

Taxing districts have the independent authority to set levy rates and collect tax revenue. The island's junior taxing districts, such

as the Park, Flood and Cemetery Districts, share a limited amount of money with senior districts, such as state, city and road districts. They all collect tax revenue in a certain order provided it doesn't exceed the minimum headroom left under the state-imposed combined local levy limit of \$5.90 per \$1,000 assessed value.

If senior taxing districts enact new or raised levies as well, junior

See **TAX**, Page 3



COURTESY PHOTO

Islanders Respond to Unrest At Capitol, Closer To Home

BY PAUL ROWLEY
prowley@vashonbeachcomber.com

A message in light was projected on the side of a building in downtown Seattle the day after a mob supporting President Donald Trump assaulted the nation's Capitol building, leaving five dead:

"Remove Trump. Democracy Not Dictatorship."

Members of Vashon's Backbone Campaign activist group had

brought their message to locations across the area, beginning early last Thursday morning to raise a banner over the Yesler Way overpass calling for the 25th amendment to remove the president for his part in invoking the mob. The banner is seen above in the group's workshop on the island.

For his part, Bill Moyer, executive director of The Backbone Campaign, said he feels that protest art allows those struggling to cope with their indignation to see that

others are standing with them.

"It reinforces that someone is still committed to defending the protection of the democracy that we aspire to be," he said.

The chaos was not confined to D.C. Many cities and communities braced for more unrest, and last week Gov. Inslee called in the National Guard over fears of demonstrators in Olympia who organized protests and breached the fence at his home to invade and occupy the

front lawn for a brief time.

In the meantime, on Tuesday House Democrats in D.C. prepared to introduce an impeachment article against President Trump following the attack at the Capitol.

Other local actions are also expected, though in contrast, among them is an island celebration of the presidential inauguration next week.

Indivisible Vashon will welcome the new Biden-Harris

administration with a car parade rolling through town Wednesday, Jan. 20, gathering at 12 p.m. in the parking lot of the Open Space for Arts & Community.

For more information, including how to drive in the parade, please contact suzanne.greenberg@indivisiblevashon.org.

Separately, Indivisible will host its monthly meeting at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 20 online. Pre-register at bitly/RegisterIVJanMeeting.

Helping Helpers: VashonBePrepared Replenishes Relief Fund

BY ELIZABETH SHEPHERD
arts@vashonbeachcomber.com

A Vashon community lifeline that disbursed hundreds of thousands of dollars in pandemic relief was running out of money as 2020 drew to a close.

But now, the Vashon COVID

Relief Fund, a project of Vashon-BePrepared, has been replenished and will be able to continue its work in this new year.

Throughout the pandemic, Vashon BePrepared, working with the Emergency Operations Center, has been making hundreds of thousands of dollars in reimbursements to partner agencies and organizations serving at-risk

communities on Vashon with food, housing relief and business recovery assistance. The

See **HELP**, Page 5

Local Leading Man Is Recalled for His Talent and Kindness

BY ELIZABETH SHEPHERD
arts@vashonbeachcomber.com

Marshall McKay Murray, an actor known for his virtuoso performances of leading roles in many local theater productions, died on Saturday, Jan. 2, at Providence Hospital, in Everett. He was 41 years old.

His death was caused by pneumonia and other medical complications following a head injury on Dec. 20.

On Vashon, islanders involved in the theater community and beyond recalled Murray's immense talent. They also spoke of how he helped instill esprit de

corps throughout their community, always encouraging others to do their best work.

"I never saw more commitment on stage," said Steffon Moody, who directed Murray in a local production of "Black Comedy" in 2013.

Moody described the rare blend of charm, comedy and gravity-defying athleticism that thrilled theatre-goers on Vashon.

"The audience would be left with the unforgettable feeling that Buster Keaton and Cary Grant had merged into one person and shown up at their community theater just for the heck of it," he said.

Susan Hanson, who directed Murray in local productions of "Chicago" and "Noises Off," also praised his work onstage and off.

"It was his ability to make the character really live on stage, physically and emotionally, that grabbed the audience and made them believe every line," she said. "Marshall was a gifted performer, but he also supported those community actors who were new to the process. He was patient, kind and a joy to work with."

Along the way, Murray influenced many young people who were cast in shows with him.

See **MURRAY**, Page 4

HAPPENING

Vashon Island Midwifery to host virtual grand opening

Vashon Island Midwifery, a new nonprofit Collaborative Health and Education Center, will host a virtual Grand Opening and Live Listening Session event at 5 p.m. Friday, Jan. 15 for the community to learn more about the group's mission, vision, programs and services, as well as to get an introduction to providers and leadership teams.

Following a brief presentation will be a live Q&A/listening session where the audience is encouraged to ask questions and share ideas, current issues and needs to support the organization's focus in 2021 and beyond.

In a press release, the organization said its

mission is to provide access to community midwifery, perinatal, reproductive, newborn and child health and education services on Vashon.

Due to the unique disposition of families living on the island, those seeking support in perinatal and reproductive health are often faced with barriers that limit their access to safe, convenient, and affordable care.

To learn more about Vashon Island Midwifery, get involved, access services or register for the event, visit online at vashonislandmidwifery.com.

Community Council will kick off new year

The Vashon-Maury Island Community Council will host its next meeting at 7 p.m. Monday, Jan. 18, on Webex, inviting special guest speaker Peter Rubin, member

of the King County Metro Transit Advisory Commission, to present.

Rubin is considering starting a local Metro bus riders forum for islanders to join. Send questions for Rubin to answer at the meeting to David Vogel at dsvogel.att@gmail.com.

For more information about how to attend the meeting, visit VMICC.net.

Water Taxi not in service Monday

The King County Water Taxi's West Seattle and Vashon Island routes will not be in service on Monday, Jan. 18 in observation of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Both routes return to full commuter service on Tuesday, Jan. 19. For the water taxi's sailing schedule, please visit the Water Taxi homepage online at tinyurl.com/y6pm54y9.

Tax

From Page 1

districts may have their levies reduced to a lower rate to stay within \$5.90, and therefore collect less revenue.

There is no easy solution available to fix this, although an attempt has been made to find a small one on Vashon. After speaking to Parks commissioners, Rep. Joe Fitzgibbon, D-Burien, drafted legislation last year to rewrite state tax law and allow park and recreation districts in Washington to collect tax revenue outside of the chokehold of the local district levy limit required by state law. The bill quickly stalled, but with the legislative session starting this week, House Bill 1034 will soon be introduced by Fitzgibbon and sponsored by Rep. Eileen Cody, D-West Seattle.

Now that the Health Care and Fire Districts, two of the largest local taxing districts on the island and ranked higher in the pecking order, have set their respective tax rates, and the island's combined local taxing districts can't collect more tax revenue beyond the capacity left in the \$5.90, Parks will be the first to see a reduction in tax revenue this year in order to keep the limit in check.

That's where things are now, though after receiving input from members of the public, the health district is planning an informal gathering between commissioners of the island's taxing districts so that those participating can learn more about each other's priorities and challenges.

However, Vashon may be facing a greater threat than Parks' losses alone. Casting a shadow over attempts to build on community partnership, any tax raises from larger players in the county will supersede Vashon's much smaller local districts and inadvertently take the lion's share of tax revenue on which they depend, wiping some out entirely in the process.

"The county, which in this case would be the road district and the library system, very much believe they still need the money," Pryne said at the meeting.

For now, the COVID-19 pandemic has forced the King County Library System to abandon a plan first proposed last February to raise its levy rate, and the board will not consider a tax increase in 2021. Executive Director Lisa Rosenblum advised the board that KCLS will need a levy lid lift to sustain library operations. But by April, it was clear that it was not the right time politically to put a measure on the ballot. She noted that there was little chance that the costly initiative would succeed given the financial hardship that many face as a result of COVID-19.

But a tax raise to finance King County Roads, which was also delayed because of the pandemic, is not out of the question and could appear on the ballot this year.

"Road Services is in the early stages of mapping out a plan to address falling



\$10 Property Tax Limit In Washington

Other

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- Affordable housing
- Metropolitan parks
- Criminal justice
- Ferry services

Local Districts

Counties, cities, and road districts are known as "senior districts" and get first priority in levying the \$5.90:

- Counties receive \$1.80 for general fund
- County road levy of \$2.25 is authorized in unincorporated areas
- Cities receive \$3.375
- The remainder is allocated to "junior districts" which include fire, water, park and recreation, cemetery, hospital, stadium, flood control, airport, and numerous other districts

Note: PUDs and port districts are senior districts that are not subject to the \$5.90 aggregate limit for local regular levies. Each has a limit of \$0.45.



PHOTO COURTESY MUNICIPAL RESEARCH AND SERVICES CENTER

The island's junior taxing districts, such as the Park, Flood and Cemetery Districts, share a limited amount of money with senior districts, such as state, city and road districts. They all collect tax revenue in a certain order provided it doesn't exceed the minimum headroom left under the state-imposed combined local levy limit of \$5.90 per \$1,000 assessed value.

revenues and ever-increasing demands to our county road system and supporting networks," a county spokesperson said.

"Best-case Scenario"

The complicated Washington State property tax system dates back to the 1970s when voters amended the Constitution to restrict the annual amount of property taxes that could be levied on property to 1% of its value.

Junior and senior taxing districts are subject to a 1% annual increase of their levy unless a higher amount is approved by the voters, though some do not require the voters' approval to increase their taxes.

In November, for example, conditions allowed KCLS to unanimously adopt a resolution of "substantial need," putting a tax levy on property to generate about \$500,000 of additional revenue to help stave off a growing budget deficit.

Public hospital districts, meanwhile, can levy up to \$.75 per \$1,000 value assessed without a public vote per state law.

The \$5.90 per \$1,000 assessed value cap on local levies belongs to what is referred to as Washington's \$10 constitutional limit, or the maximum annual rate of property taxes that can be imposed on property owners.

The \$10 constitutional limit is broken down into three categories: "State," or the state school fund, limited to \$3.60 per \$1,000 of assessed property value; "local districts," limited to \$5.90 per \$1,000 of assessed property value; and "Other," leaving \$0.50 per \$1,000 of assessed property value.

This number, referred to as the '\$.50 cent gap,' comprises a pool of funds available for different needs, such as the protection of open spaces, or providing for emergency medical services or affordable housing programs, as well as the support of metropolitan parks and ferry services.

Some would say that it is a good thing that municipal governments, such as Parks and Health Care, cannot tax property owners endlessly.

While it may have kept a reasonable leash on any frivolous taxation in years past, this model has put particular

pressure on the Vashon Park District, which starts the new year on a difficult path, anticipating a minimum of \$130,000 less to fund recreation services, maintain facilities, repair assets, and more.

Commissioners were the first on the island to feel the squeeze from prorationing in recent times, but they were also among the first to discuss options for a reprieve. Predicting a situation such as this could come to pass, they requested assistance from the legislature following the creation of the island's health district in 2019.

Now they have placed their hopes on the chance of the passage of Fitzgibbon's bill, which would enable Parks to collect levy revenue from the \$.50 cent gap and to continue operating as it does now.

Executive Director Elaine Ott-Rocheford called Fitzgibbon's bill the "best-case scenario" that will keep the district on track to achieve its goals, such as the completion of deferred maintenance projects and increasing recreation programming.

There is enough room in the \$.50 cent gap today to sustain Parks' activities, and there are no ramifications for other parks and recreation districts in the state if the bill were passed. Nowhere else in Washington is there currently a park and recreation district where the gap is close to being entirely utilized. The bill would simply give them access to another pool of funds.

Crucially, moving Vashon Parks out of the \$5.90 cap is not the cure for the island's senior taxing district dilemma, because if it comes to it, the Flood Control, Health Care and Cemetery Districts are next in line and could be open to prorationing.

If the bill were passed, there would be no change to Parks' current voter-approved \$.45 cent levy rate, and its levy would still need 60% approval to be renewed or increased in a future election.

In a recent interview, Fitzgibbon said that communities in unincorporated King County are more vulnerable to prorationing. Administrators of senior

taxing districts, he said, frequently do not understand what the effects of a tax increase could have on municipalities served by numerous taxing districts at the local level, as opposed to those serving the county at large.

The next step is to send the bill to the House Finance Committee, and then schedule a public hearing for it. But the bill is likely to be confronted by a multitude of other pressing issues for lawmakers to concentrate on arising from the pandemic. Commissioners are likely to have an answer one way or another by spring.

"In order to make the sort of sweeping changes to the property tax, we probably have to amend the Constitution, and that's fairly challenging," Fitzgibbon said.

In the meantime, all Parks commissioners can do is wait.

Bill or Bust

Ott-Rocheford believes that, based on the current tax rates for local taxing districts, if the bill does not pass, trouble will begin immediately for Parks.

"We will have to lay off staff and reduce services by mid-2021," she said, adding that even with the library system off the ballot, a roads levy lift would slash the district's budget.

"We would be cut in half," Ott-Rocheford said.

Except for completing the most vital capital projects this year that cannot be delayed, the district's reserves would likely be drawn down by as much as \$200,000 by the end of 2022, Ott-Rocheford said, primarily to maintain cash flow, and leave the district with few other choices than

to borrow on a line of credit to sustain operations, an option that the board will likely be reluctant to accept.

"So we have to cut \$200,000 a year out of our budget in order to just stay afloat, and that would mean reduction of services," she said. "What that looks like, I don't know. We haven't decided that yet."

Vashon Parks could explore a few alternatives with the county that would reduce the burden it faces due to prorationing, including asking King County for what is known as a buy-down, where the county would essentially reimburse Parks for the amount it was prorated, plus accounting for other factors that would further affect Parks.

The King County Council has experience dealing with junior taxing districts pushed over the threshold of the \$5.90, including two affected by the countywide Best Start for Kids levy in 2016 (BSK). The Si View Metropolitan Park District in North Bend was slated to lose \$316,000 of tax revenue because of prorationing, followed by another round amounting to \$114,000 from the Fall City Metropolitan Park District.

To compensate for Si View's losses, the county used a portion of the levy to effectively subsidize programs in the Si View Metropolitan Park District related to youth development and culture, although the Fall City Park District did not have any programs or services that met the eligibility requirements for BSK funding.

"We have gone through some effort, when enacting a countywide levy that was going to impact a junior taxing district, to find ways

to support the work of that junior taxing district," Vice-Chair Joe McDermott, who represents Vashon, said.

The county has also modeled estimated prorationing that could befall other taxing districts over the lifetime of the BSK levy and will collaborate with affected park and recreation districts to address the issue in the years to come.

Another option is for Vashon Parks to run what is called an excess levy.

Taxes levied under the \$10 limit are classified as "regular" levies, while those above the limit are "excess" or "special" levies that require the approval of the voters. Parks could present an excess levy to island residents every year and ask them to accept a \$.45 cent rate once again in order to make up for the district's shortfall. But the cost for Parks to run a levy can be as high as \$20,000, and this approach makes staff retention and long-term planning almost impossible.

Ott-Rocheford said that she thought it was inevitable that senior districts will try to enact levy lid lifts in the near future that will propel Parks into oblivion without some intervention. She said that the commissioners will pursue all the options on the table to maintain the programs and services that the islanders want and expect. But to her, right now it's Fitzgibbon's bill or bust.

"If this state bill passes, we're completely safe, no matter what happens. Even if the hospital district went all the way to \$.75 cents, we're still safe," she said. "There is that much room in the \$10 [constitutional limit]. Which is why we're going for this option."

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THURSDAY, JANUARY 28, 2021



Suzanne Greenberg (top right) danced in front of her car, which led Vashon Indivisible's inaugural parade through Vashon on Jan. 20. Deb Pierce McCabe (bottom right) hoisted a bubble machine through her sunroof, while Marc Pease and Suzanne Mager donned festive election-themed mask-wear for the occasion (top left). The parade started at Island Center Forest Trailhead at 188th St. and wound its way through Vashon before making its final lap through the middle of town (bottom left).

JIM DIERS PHOTOS

Ridin' With Biden: Islanders Celebrate With a Car Parade

BY ELIZABETH SHEPHERD
arts@vashonbeachcomber.com

Did you hear some folks leaning on their car horns last Wednesday afternoon?

Those were elated islanders, who took to the roads around Vashon in a car parade,

celebrating the inaugurations of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris.

Organized by Indivisible Vashon, the parade included 31 cars, festooned with patriotic bunting, balloons, flags and handmade signs. The caravan began at the Island Center Trailhead

at 188th street and then traveled south to Burton, back up through Portage and Ellisport, winding its way to Cove Road and then back through town to its starting place, where the celebration concluded in a safe, socially distanced way.

Suzanne Greenberg, who is part of a six-member leadership team

for Indivisible Vashon, was in charge of planning for the parade. She said she received an important assist from Stefan Freelan, who designed the parade's circuitous route.

For the past four years, more than 90 members of Indivisible Vashon have quietly used the old

fashioned tools of ink, paper and stamps, as well as texting and phone banking, to urge people both here in Washington and around the country to exercise their right to vote in state-wide contests and the presidential

See **BIDEN**, Page 5

Legislature Holds Hearing on Bill as Parks Hang in Balance

BY PAUL ROWLEY
prowley@vashonbeachcomber.com

At a public hearing last week, lawmakers had their first look at a bill that would rewrite state tax law and allow park and recreation districts in Washington to collect much-needed tax revenue from a different source of funding than is currently available.

They did not vote on the bill,

introduced by Rep. Joe Fitzgibbon, D-Burien, and sponsored by Rep. Eileen Cody, D-West Seattle. But the hearing in the House Finance Committee was open to public comment, and a number of lawmakers questioned Fitzgibbon about some components of the bill and the issue it is intended to solve.

See **PARKS**, Page 5

Vaccines Come To Vashon, Island Interest at Fever Pitch

Vashon Emergency Operations Center COVID-19 Pandemic Situation Report

Jan. 19 - Jan. 25, 2021

THE VIRUS

Virus statistics: Public

Subscriber mailing label below this line

Health - Seattle & King County (PHSKC) reports 95 positive cases of COVID-19 on Vashon since the pandemic began. At press time, there had been one new case since the last edition of this report. The Public Health —Seattle & King County dashboard has closed the data lag gap and now shows both of the island's two COVID-related deaths.

See **VIRUS**, Page 8

Timing Is Everything in Talks About Re-Opening School

BY ELIZABETH SHEPHERD
arts@vashonbeachcomber.com

To go or not to go? That is the question as parents, school staff and administrators continue to weigh a phase-in of hybrid education for elementary students that could begin as soon as the next few weeks.

The pending decision comes amidst both progress and setbacks in the battle against the coronavirus and a drumbeat of breaking news.

A vaccination push in Washington state has now opened eligibility to all those 65 and older and those ages 50 and older who live in multigenerational households, but has yet to phase in shots for all teachers and school staff.

And late last week, news broke that the UK strain of the virus — which is almost twice as transmissible as the strain now common in the US — was identified in patients in Snohomish County.

There have also been reports about labor disputes surrounding school re-openings across the nation and nearby.

The Seattle Times reported last week that the Bellevue School

District took its teacher's union to court, charging that teachers were violating their bargaining agreement prohibiting a work stoppage or slowdown. The move came after some teachers did not show up to work at Bellevue's elementary school when it opened to hybrid education last week. The issue was resolved this Monday.

Here on Vashon, VISD has announced its plan to move to hybrid education, beginning with elementary school students, but without a firm start date. The plan will provide four half-days of education in-person for these ages, with additional education continuing online. Parents who wish to keep their children home for full-time distance learning may do so, with the understanding that their children's teachers and classmates will most likely change in that case.

One week ago, VISD held a Zoom Q and A session for parents, with administrators and principals fielding questions about bus transportation, ventilation and other matters related to the re-opening of schools. The next night, at a special board meeting convened by the district,

Chautauqua Elementary School principal Rebecca Goertzel described in detail the preparations that had been made at the school.

In recent weeks, Goertzel said, 65% of Chautauqua parents have opted in for the school's new hybrid education plan, while 35% have said they will continue to keep their children at home.

Conversations about the re-opening have also spilled onto social media in recent days, with a handful of teachers weighing in one thread of a Vashon parents' Facebook page that stretched to almost 200 comments.

"Teachers cannot wait to get back in the classroom with your kids," one teacher wrote on the thread. "The majority of them are just not willing to put themselves and their families and the community at further risk when the vaccine is so close."

Another teacher referred to a recent survey conducted by Vashon Education Association (VEA) that found that the vast majority of its members did not feel it was safe to return to work.

See **SCHOOL**, Page 3

HAPPENING

OCCU offers 2021 Scholarships

Our Community Credit Union has announced that seven \$1,000 scholarships will be awarded to graduating 2021 high school seniors attending school in Mason, Grays Harbor, Thurston Counties and Vashon Island. Eligible individuals must be a member of OCCU. Applications and guidelines for the scholarship are available for download at ourcu.com/scholarship-program. Applications will be accepted through April 30, 2021. Winners will be announced in May 2021.

Questions can be directed to Amber Trail at 360-427-3405 or 800-426-5657 or emailed to atrail@ourcu.com. Our Community Credit Union is based in Shelton and has eight

branch locations throughout Mason, East Grays Harbor County, Thurston County and on Vashon.

Check your mask

With the emergence of a new, more infectious COVID variant, Masks For Vashon has issued a PSA for islanders: "If you have two layered masks from us, please hold them up in bright light and try to look through them. If you can see what's on the other side — if they are not truly opaque — then the suggestion is to either set those masks aside or double them up when using indoors with others outside of your home." Islanders can also pick up new, three-layer masks made by the local mask-makers group at the VARSA office, in Thiftway Plaza. For more information, visit the group at facebook.com/groups/MasksForVashon.

Ferry riders group looking for members

Members of the Ferry Riders Opinion Group (FROG) will have another opportunity to share their views about Washington State Ferries in March.

The Washington State Transportation Commission will launch its biennial ferry rider survey again and encourages the public to participate. The survey is conducted online and will be emailed to all members of the FROG. To join the FROG panel and become an ambassador for the group, visit the opinion group's website at tinyurl.com/y3x2qpdv.

The FROG survey panel was created in 2009 as a way to actively engage ferry riders and those interested in ferries on an ongoing basis. There are currently more than 6,000 FROG participants, according to the state transportation commission.

Parks

From Page 1

The bill would allow parks and recreation districts to collect money from what is known as the "\$.50 cent gap," a pool of funds maintained for various purposes by the state, including the preservation of open spaces and for help covering emergency services or affordable housing projects, as well as funding for metropolitan parks and ferry services. This reserve belongs to what is referred to as Washington's \$10 constitutional limit, or the overall annual property tax rate that can be imposed on property owners.

The so-called junior taxing districts of the island, such as the Park and Cemetery Districts, share with senior districts, such as state, city and road districts, tax revenue within the \$10 constitutional limit reserved for local districts. They all collect that money in a certain order provided it doesn't exceed the minimum headroom left under the state-imposed combined local levy limit of \$5.90 per \$1,000 assessed value.

Passage of the Fitzgibbon bill, HB1034, is the only remaining alternative for the park district this year to avoid "prorationing," an event in which junior tax districts see a reduction in the tax revenue they collect, now that the levies of other local tax districts on the island have surpassed \$5.90 per \$1,000 of assessed property value. Parks is now first in line to help make up the difference, amounting to an 11% budget cut for the district or about \$130,000.

With the hearing over, the bill will head into executive session in the finance committee today, Jan. 28, for lawmakers to consider further. Last year, an identical bill, spurred by fears of prorationing after the formation of the Vashon Health Care District, made it to the finance committee as well. But it came late in the legislative session and did not move forward.

Parks has high hopes that the bill will make a splash with lawmakers who will undoubtedly be faced with a number of other urgent problems to focus on due to the pandemic. By spring, commissioners are likely to have an answer as to the bill's fate one way or another.

"There are some great parks on Vashon Island. There's some great recreational services for the community there that are in jeopardy now," Fitzgibbon said when offering his remarks during the hearing. He added that since the island is part of unincorporated King County, it depends heavily on several special-purpose districts to provide government services, including health care and parks and recreation.

Fitzgibbon said the prorationing issue facing Parks will only get worse unless something is done about it, citing the King County Library System, which serves all of the county outside of Seattle, and King County Roads, which covers all of unincorporated King County. Both have recently considered levy lid increases and could pursue them to raise needed funding within the next two years, though KCLS will not seek a tax increase in 2021.

But this could be a much bigger issue for the island down the road. With the island's local levy limit past the tipping point, the far smaller municipal districts of Vashon could be eliminated by tax increases from the county that would unwittingly take the lion's share of the tax revenue they rely on, wiping some out entirely in the process.

Crucially, Fitzgibbon's bill would only cover parks. The Cemetery and Health Care Districts could experience prorationing to some extent if Vashon Parks were to be taken out of the \$5.90 limit.

"This is a problem with the \$5.90 statutory local levy limit that particularly impacts small, unincorporated communities that are part of much larger governmental entities" such as King County, he said.

Fitzgibbon added that, if all

else failed, taking into account the interests of the districts that could be affected, it is hoped that senior districts would consider shielding those that may stand to lose if, in the future, they were to pursue levy lid lifts.

One question from Rep. Ed Orcutt, R-Kalama, was asked about whether levy rates may fall somewhat as home values increase on the island, as they do in comparable communities, restoring some capacity below the \$5.90 limit and thereby reducing pressure on Parks. But although this was the case for a time in recent years, Fitzgibbon said, the combined local levy limit on Vashon has now been surpassed to such a degree that it has outraced any slight levy reduction relative to increasing island home prices.

The median sale price for homes on Vashon rose by 14% in 2020 over the previous year according to Windermere Vashon.

What changed in 2019, Fitzgibbon said, were the priorities of the community.

Islanders voted to create the Health Care District because the private sector was unable to provide sustainable health care services on Vashon. But after the pandemic threw significant obstacles at the commissioners, requiring a higher levy rate than anticipated to meet their objectives, the \$5.90 cap was poised to crush Parks, a long-standing government agency, Fitzgibbon said, with broad voter support.

Together with Executive Director Elaine Ott-Rocheford, Hans Van Dusen, chair of the Parks Board, testified in support of Fitzgibbon's bill. He said that Parks' services are essential for general wellbeing, even more so in the midst of the pandemic, offering facilities and programs that are as important to islanders as they are to visitors, from off-island county residents to those traveling from further reaches of the state (once it is safe to do so again).

In her remarks, Ott-Rocheford concluded that as a result of current prorationing

implemented by island districts, the projected 11% decrease in Parks' budget would result in reduced services and staff layoffs, as well as leaving the district incapable of addressing mounting asset preservation issues. But she said Parks' biggest challenge will come from senior island districts seeking levy lid lifts, namely KCLS and Roads.

With no action, the tax increases they may propose someday soon will "prorate us out of existence," she told legislators.

In a follow-up interview, she added that Parks, with sufficient reserves, will still be able to complete many grant-based projects that the board has already committed to this year, such as the renovation of the Ober Park playground and the bathroom at VES Fields, ivy remediation work and urgent repairs at Fern Cove. Ott-Rocheford added that she was applying to another county grant cycle to secure funding to help repair the community swimming pool.

But with minimal resources, event offerings, from the popular Concerts in the Park series, to new programming concepts such as a Robin Hood-themed storytelling walk for families around Fisher Pond, may have to be canceled without a fix from Olympia. Going with or without that assistance now could change the way Vashon spends its post-pandemic days.

"We're just being prudent and evaluating what our other options would be if the bill does not go through," she said.

Biden

From Page 1

Plans for the parade were already in the works in early January, but Greenberg said that after Jan. 6 — when violent rioters, urged on by Donald Trump, stormed the U.S. Capitol in a failed attempt to stop the counting of electoral college votes — her group considered calling off the celebration. The group continued to anxiously monitor serious threats of more violence at state capitols, which thankfully did not materialize.

And two days before the inauguration, Greenberg said, Indivisible Vashon sent out word that the parade was on.

"This was not a protest," she said. "We were celebrating the duly-elected president of our country."

Greenberg said the parade was warmly received by islanders.

"One person gave us the finger," she said. "Everyone else on the entire route beeped and waved."

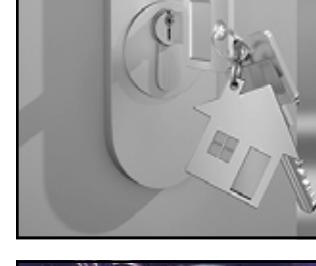
She said that after the parade, it was hard for members of her group to stop dancing, with plenty of space between people from different households beneath the towering trees surrounding the parking lot of Island Center Trailhead.

"It was healing and wonderful," she said.

To find out more about the work of Indivisible Vashon, visit indivisiblevashon.org.

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Vashon Audubon Bird of the Month Pine Siskin



Photo by Richard Miller, Great Backyard Bird Count

These small finches are flocking to Vashon because of an "irruption," a temporary migration change due to a scarcity of a favored food. It's the low supply of Canadian spruce seed that has rerouted these social Siskins to feast on our firs, red alders, maples and thistles.

Sadly, not all of them make it to Vashon, and those that do are hungry and tired. They enjoy seeds in feeders, where they might hang upside down, showing off their brown and white plumage with yellow touches on wings. However, when the birds flock together at feeders, they can transmit diseases. It's crucial to keep feeders and the ground under them clean. Learn how at www.allaboutbirds.org/news/how-to-clean-your-bird-feeder. And if you see sick birds at your feeder, take it down for awhile.

The Siskins chatter about with a variety of song in large flocks, often sharing space with American Goldfinches.

Support birds by joining Vashon Audubon, an all-volunteer organization, for just \$20 a year.

To sign up and learn about the benefits of joining,

go to vashonaudubon.org/join-us

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