

EDITORIAL

Fire District Should Better Care for Its Force

This year, Vashon Fire & Rescue has served its highest purpose in many ways, but perhaps most notably in its activation and administration of Vashon's Emergency Operations Center.

Under Chief Charlie Krimmert's direction, the EOC and MRC have contributed immeasurably to keeping our island informed and safe during the pandemic. A direct result is that Vashon still has one of the lowest rates of infection in all of King County.

Krimmert, during his tenure, has also done much to get the district's financial house in order, and for that, he deserves the community's gratitude.

But still, we are concerned by something now happening at VIFR.

An article in this week's Beachcomber details a grievance filed by members of the firefighter's union Local 4189, charging unfair pay practices for firefighters asked to quarantine in September because of on-the-job exposures to COVID-19.

Disturbingly, the grievance also charges that the district's pay policies disincentives firefighters to report potential exposures to COVID.

After failed talks, the grievance was met with an eight-page refusal by Fire Chief Charlie Krimmert and is now in the hands of elected VIFR commissioners. At press time, it is not certain what the commissioners' response will be.

In the meantime, another case of COVID-19 has just cropped up in the district, with another firefighter testing positive and several others ordered to quarantine because of on-the-job exposure.

While this most recent issue is not part of the grievance now being considered, the same issues described in it will once again come into play with the newly infected firefighter and his colleagues.

Will these selfless public servants and high-risk heroes really be asked to use up their sick pay or vacation time during COVID quarantines, including those resulting from on-the-job exposure?

It's difficult to understand why the union and the district haven't negotiated a special new bargaining agreement dealing with the pay issues surrounding COVID-19. The present bargaining agreement between VIFR and the union, covering 2016 through 2020, couldn't possibly have anticipated all the HR issues wreaked by the pandemic.

In his lengthy refusal of the grievance, Krimmert laid the blame solely on the union for not establishing new pay policies related to COVID.

But we believe it was also Krimmert's job, as well as the responsibility of elected fire commissioners, to make sure that such an agreement was reached.

Krimmert is the well-paid chief of the department, in charge of all aspects of its administration. In contrast, the leadership positions in the local union are volunteer positions, with small stipends, and carried out by full-time firefighters who are quite busy with other life-saving work. Even if the union dropped the ball, the administration should have picked it up.

Commissioners are charged with oversight of Krimmert's administration. They should have tasked him with making sure that employment issues such as the ones the district is now facing didn't happen.

By way of comparison, it's hard to imagine that Vashon Island School District's superintendent would ever allow his teacher and support personnel union members to work for 10 months without signing a bargaining agreement specific to COVID-19 concerns. Nor would the current school board conceivably allow that to happen. To do so would put the district and public funds at risk.

But one needn't look to a comparison with the school district, because ten months into the pandemic, plenty of other nearby fire districts have put COVID-specific pay policies into place.

No matter how this grievance is resolved, follow-up should be the highest priority for VIFR. A good first step was revealed in documents requested for our story

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Thinking About Owls and Other Things

When I make my bed in the morning, I pull back the top of the comforter the same amount every day and lay my pillows across neatly, and then I put down a pair of throw pillows that belonged to an old couch I gave away this year. I fold my spare blanket the same way and press it into the end of the bed so there aren't any wrinkles, and then I leave the room.



PAUL ROWLEY

A mile or so away, the gentle tide charts a similar course as my

comforter on the shore. I wash my face and dress in the same rotation of clothes in the drawer, a t-shirt, hoodie, my jacket from Granny's hanging on the bathroom door hook. I straighten a crooked framed print on the wall of the island. I arrange the silverware I washed after dinner the night before neatly.

I put the same knickknacks out for the big holidays, pumpkins and gourds at Halloween, a weird Turkey at Thanksgiving, and I hang garland around the kitchen

sink in December. I listen to the same Christmas songs.

Leaving for town on foot I saw under the power line where an owl was perched one night recently. I saw it while I was walking in the dark, and it scared me half to death — is it "hooting?" Is that what I call it? His little silhouette blacking out a few stars in the clear night sky.

I pack my computer in my bag every morning but almost never use it because it's not working right. I put it back down on the table at the end of

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

LOCAL NEWS

Jingle Bells from The Beachcomber

From our perch here at The Beachcomber, we wish everyone on this island the happiest of holidays.

It's been an impossibly difficult year, and here at the paper, we've been short-staffed and overwhelmed many times in 2020.

We realized back in March that practically every story we'd be writing this year would be a COVID story, in one way or another. The pandemic has reshaped our lives, upended our traditions and stressed our neighbors, local businesses, agencies and nonprofits.

But thanks to deep community support, we've somehow gotten the paper out each week. And along the way, there has been much good news to report, about the resilience and strength of our town.

We have such gratitude to all our many community contributors and partners this year, and we think that they have helped make our paper even better this year.

These partners and "friends of The Beachcomber" are too numerous to name, but special thanks must go to the Emergency Operations Center, which has done the heavy lifting in terms of providing timely and factual information about the pandemic each week on these pages.

We thank island artist Steffon Moody, too, for his beautiful and island-centric cartoons each week.

We thank the Vashon Rip tide for making sure that the voices of youth are represented on our pages.

We thank Bruce Haulman for making sure we remember Vashon's history.

We thank Phil Clapham and Karen Biondo, two guest writers who particularly made our pages shine this year.

We thank Vashon Island Visual Artists and Vashon Center for the Arts for providing us with news of our arts

community in this still, art-starved time.

We thank every single person who has contributed a thoughtful commentary to our opinion pages, and we love our letter writers, whether they are criticizing us or not.

We have such gratitude to our readers, who believe that local journalism still matters.

It's a cliché, but we really are all in this together.

Reporting Vashon's news in 2020 has been an honor for us.

Liz Shepherd and Paul Rowley, Reporters

COMMUNITY

On Masks for Santa and Mrs. Claus

Santa and Mrs. Claus, being of one household, outside, and nowhere near other people did not need to wear masks. As you know they wear masks all day long working with the elves to make presents, and for this unattended event, they wanted to remind children that Christmas, and Santa and Mrs. Claus are real, and still the same as always.

Santa has been quarantining for his two weeks before he flies through the skies (with no helpers this year on the sleigh), and not only is he wearing a mask, face shield, and gloves when he visits our houses this year, he is also quarantining after Christmas for two weeks, just in case, even though he won't be anywhere near anyone when he drops off the presents.

I know we want children, and Santa, and Mrs. Claus, the elves, and every child and family to be safe, and I know we can trust Santa to do the right thing.

— Shelley Hanna

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SOUND PUBLISHING INC.

Savoring the Secrets and Science of Riparian Areas

Earlier this month I was lucky enough to be standing on a bridge over Judd Creek in Paradise Valley on a cold clear morning. I leaned back against the bridge railing and watched the low sun sparkle through the nearly leafless streamside forest.

I listened to the creek burble steadily on its way from Island Center Forest to Quartermaster Harbor. Now and then a spent alder or salmon-berry leaf let go and drifted down to join collections of yellow and brown leaves along the edges of the streambed. I felt the cold air and just a kiss of sunshine on my face. I felt present and at peace in that moment, a state of being that's been all too rare for me lately.

As a trained ecologist, I also "saw" more than what my senses and

feelings experienced at that moment. Embedded within my experience was also an awareness of everything I knew about the life of the place — the aquatic insects working among the algae and leaf detritus in the streambed, the coho salmon that would soon be making their way along the stream to spawn, the spring flush of flower blossoms and new greenery on skunk cabbage, salmonberry, alder and the rest of the plant community, the rising crescendo of spring music as songbirds from Central and South America add their voices to the birds who've stayed here all along.

What I saw, even felt, at that moment was something of the pulse of an ecosystem. You don't have to



JIM EVANS

be an ecologist to appreciate the vitality of a place like this — but, for me, everything I learn enhances my experience.

The ecosystem I was appreciating, consciously and unconsciously, is known as a riparian area.

Riparian areas are the lands alongside rivers and streams that are strongly influenced by the adjacent aquatic environment. These places, the streamside transitions between land and water, are vibrant places important to humans and critical for conserving wildlife in the 21st century. Although stream and riparian ecosystems occupy only a small portion of our landscapes,

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Letters

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Thanks For The Memories

Bittersweet to hear that this is Ron Irvine's last Harvest at Vashon Winery. For so many of us with roots in Winemaking throughout the Pacific Northwest, Ron was one of the True pioneers and an inspiration for myself personally. He surely will be missed but at the same time, it is so great to hear that he will be able to spend time with Family during the next chapter of

his adventure. Cheers, — Matt Dodson

Sea Mar listens and steps up

A shout out of thanks and appreciation for our new Sea Mar Clinic on Vashon and their responsiveness! After calling to provide feedback on a less-than-positive provider experience — which administrator, Kerry, took with open-mindedness and sincere empathy — the clinic followed up as promised and pro-actively

called me on Monday, Dec. 14 to inform me that Dr. Tom Erdmann was now available to see patients. I got scheduled in 4 days. On Dec. 17, I had the experience of being with a PCP who acted like he had all the time in the world to hear my concerns and answer my questions (even though he had a full schedule) and who worked with me to quickly troubleshoot a solution. Within an hour of leaving my appointment — yes, within the hour — I had already received a phone call from Sea Mar informing me that my "expedited referral to a specialist" was underway. I now have a critical appointment scheduled

for next week, versus a previously scheduled appointment in March 2021! Having recently returned to Vashon after working in the Middle East for six years, I'm grateful to the Vashon Health Care District for ensuring we have a robust local health clinic at our doorsteps. Like any transition, there will be bumps along the way, but if my experience is any indication, they are willing to listen and try to make it right. That's excellent customer service and effective medicine. Thank you!

— Karen du Four des Champs

Evans

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acre-for-acre they provide more vital wildlife habitat than any other part of our landscapes. In the Pacific Northwest, riparian areas have received attention for their critical contributions to salmon spawning and rearing habitats, but the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife says that 85 percent of Washington's wildlife species need riparian habitats for some or all of their essential life activities. This means everything from stream insects and pollinators, to songbirds, to deer, bear and elk, and much more.

Stream and riparian systems are also an important source of resources and services for people, including fish production, flood attenuation, carbon sequestration and groundwater recharge. In the Puget Lowlands, intensive logging, farming and development have occurred without much consideration for the natural functions of stream and riparian systems, reducing their ability to provide these resources and greatly diminishing their capacity to support fish and wildlife.

Stream and riparian systems are rightly recognized as public resources at the state, county and local levels. Here on Vashon we are fortunate that our two largest stream systems — Shinglemill Creek and Judd Creek — have been the long-term focus of protection and restoration by

the Vashon-Maury Island Land Trust and King County.

In the last decade, in particular, both drainages have seen important property acquisitions, improvements in stream channel habitat, a dedicated effort to control invasive plant species and the planting of thousands of native trees and shrubs. These last two parts of the effort have benefited greatly from the involvement of many island volunteers.

To enrich our engagement with these places, in January, Vashon Audubon will offer a short webinar course exploring the secrets and the science of these vital parts of our community. Riparian areas are places of beauty, wonder and discovery, and we can learn together how to better appreciate, protect and restore these ecosystems for the benefit of all.

Box: Vashon Audubon's workshop, Riparian Ecosystems of Vashon Island, led by Jim Evans, will be held via Zoom on two Thursday evenings, Jan. 14 and 21, from 6:30 to 8:00 p.m., and includes an optional three-hour socially distanced field trip to riparian areas on Vashon.

The field trip will be offered as two sections, Saturdays, Jan. 16 and 23, with each trip limited to six participants. Overall enrollment is limited to 12 participants. Please register by contacting Sylvia Sohlt at sylvia@sylvan-sanctuary.com.

Jim Evans, an ecologist and educator, serves on the Vashon Audubon board.

Rowley

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the day on the same spot. And then I do my daily routine in reverse.

Everything I own has a place where it belongs, and I'm a tasteful if overly scrupulous decorator all year long, so much that my college dorm room was an official stop on the campus tour for incoming freshmen. As if to say, "look at this, he's got it together, every day is meticulously planned for. Make sure to take a piece of chocolate from the basket hung on the door on your way out."

I have made the pilgrimage home for the holidays as I have gotten older, seemingly from a little farther away each year, starting with a few miles, to crossing a state line, and finally, an 8-hour flight to Boston, "wouldn't miss this one-this-year" and all.

Not this year. Not going home. I

have some feelings about the whole "where-do-I-belong" thing, as evident by my move to this island from Massachusetts over two years ago, but until I have a better answer, I'll stay put in my little house, healthy and COVID-free.

I have been present for 25 Christmases in a row. Not this year. It tracks because all of my routines have eroded over these last months. 2020 has masterfully called my bluff. The jig is up.

I have some seriously poor time management skills! With a long list of articles I mean to write, I am typing this out on my phone an hour and a half before my deadline. The bed is not made anymore. I scroll through dozens of TikTok videos before I get up every day. There have not been any decorations this year. I had to move three times and most of my things are still in the boxes I packed them in.

There was a King Tide recently as you will see on page 3, another example of seeming unrestraint in my world not lost on me. I haven't shaved my

face in three days. Those college tour guides would hurry the group along if they caught sight of me, no chocolate left because I would have eaten it all already.

I don't know what wisdom there is in any of this because nothing I have described is really terrible. I don't want a bunch of people coming by my room any more. I do wash my sheets. I always make my deadline. The tide goes back out. If there is any lesson I've learned this year, it probably came from that little owl, not looking inwardly at all, perched up there on a long night just like the one before, probably, in his element. I have no choice but to stan.

Then I remember all of us are born already knowing how to breathe. So it's probably safe for you to trust what you've made of, for all the rest of the hours you'll spend left in the dark this year, a long way from home.

Paul Rowley is a reporter for The Beachcomber.

Editorial

From Page 6

— VIFR is now reaching out to research how other districts are dealing with this issue.

One untold story in The Beachcomber — due to the mad rush of events and short staffing at the paper — is that several members of Vashon's current firefighting force have answered a call to serve at the King County Federal Way COVID testing

facility, where positivity rates are high and growing. Gowned, gloved, face-shielded and masked, their task is to swab the noses of those being tested.

While career firefighters receive pay for this dangerous work (which is reimbursed to the district by the county), they are also doing it from a sense of selflessness and deep community service that is the hallmark

of their profession. When we need them, they are always there.

VIFR needs to reach an agreement with its union that fully takes into account the increasingly high-risk nature of firefighters' work, and compensates them fairly if they must quarantine after COVID exposure. Any extra costs of this could never outweigh the benefits. And in the teeth of a raging pandemic, firefighters shouldn't have to worry about whether they have any sick time left if they are exposed to COVID-19.

We believe our

community would support this use of their tax dollars.

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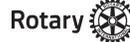
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Our Town: During Pandemic, An Artist Steps Outside



COURTESY PHOTO

John Lucas has been a Vashon resident and artist for 30 years.

Arts Editor's note: This season, The Beachcomber has partnered with Vashon Island Visual Artists (VIVA) to highlight the vibrant arts scene on Vashon. This week, John Lucas, a Vashon resident and artist for 30 years, tells us, in his own words, how his practice has changed and what he has been creating in 2020. To learn more about VIVA and find out how to connect with Lucas and other local artists, or arrange a private studio visit that adheres to COVID-19 protocols, visit vivistarts.com.

In September I was

expecting to be at the Morris Graves Foundation in Northern California as an artist in residence. There I had planned to work in Morris Grave's studio drawing and painting around the lake and in the surrounding forest. Both are part of the Foundation property. When the pandemic broke out last spring the Foundation canceled the entire schedule for 2020.

Landscape has never been a primary focus for me in my artwork but with the residency canceled and the isolation of the pandemic I found a need to get out of the studio and into the

world. So, this summer I ventured out and did some en plein air drawings around Vashon, sometimes alone and sometimes with a friend. With the change of weather, I've continued with some of this imagery in the studio using my drawings as a starting point or much larger images. It's been fun and a welcome change from the work I had been doing. For materials, I've been using archival black brush pens sometimes with a sumi ink wash.

My three weeks working in Morris Grave's studio by the lake has been rescheduled for fall 2021.