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County COVID-19 cases above 2,000

By Ken Stern

Reports of COVID-19 cases in Skagit County from Skagit Public Health continues to be alarming. Coronavirus infections for 2020 rose above 2,000 Monday, when 28 more people tested positive. In November, 758 cases were reported to the Washington Department of Health. Thirty-six people were hospitalized last month, 34% of all hospitalizations this year. There were three deaths, bringing to 27 the number of Skagit residents killed by the virus.

In the past two weeks 337.5 new cases per 100,000 residents were diagnosed, a six-times increase from Nov. 1.

Cases in the county are "going straight up," Dr. Howard Leibrand, Skagit County Public Health Officer told the Weekly News Tuesday. He tracked the climb from early September two week case reports of 30 rising to 100 in October and now spiking over 300.

Leibrand said new infections are "across the board" in all demographics. There are clusters of infections from people gathering, within families or two households socializing. There are fewer cases from businesses than he expected and those are primarily employee-to-employee, "in the back room," and not out front with customers.

While Skagit hospitals have close to 80% of beds occupied,

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IT'S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS – Remember the old normal of 2017? That Dec. 2 Santa arrived in the Hook & Ladder Department's white fire truck about 5:30 and 1-2-3 poof, with the help of children the Town's Christmas tree's lights came on, like magic. Christmas is still magical. It is just very different this year. Please read your children the letter from Santa, page 2. – File photo by Ken Stern

Skagit County election results certified

By Ken Stern

Washington Secretary of State Kim Wyman certified state election results Tuesday. Skagit County's election results were certified by the Skagit County Canvassing Board Nov. 24. All candidates leading after the first week of vote counts, Nov. 10 won. The closest race was public defender Elizabeth Yost Neidzwski's win for the Skagit Superior Court Judge Position 3. She defeated Mount Vernon attorney Tom Seguire by 388 votes.

Turnout was 86.4%, with 74,039 people voting. That is some six percent higher than for the 2016 Trump-Clinton election. The Auditor's office estimated that 70 percent of returned ballots were returned before election day. There were 11,692 more registered Skagit County voters during this election than in 2016's.

The County was again last among westside counties in finishing the ballot count. County Public Information Officer Laura Han noted that "In 2019 and prior, we would have had 12-16 board workers at a time inspecting each ballot to ensure it can be read by the tabulation equipment. This year, we've only been able to have five people in our office safely."

Next year the office will have new ballot sorter/scanner to speed the initial counting, sorting, opening and signature checking processes, Han said, noting that some larger counties in the state have one or more of these machines speeding their processing time

They have not requested additional funding in the 2021 Auditor's budget, Han said.

All election results are at <https://results.vote.wa.gov/results/20201103/>.

La Conner's Christmas spirit survives holiday cancellations

By Bill Reynolds

Santa Claus is coming to town – just not as often this Christmas season.

The COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions to stem its spread will limit Santa's appearances in La Conner, but Mayor Ramon Hayes – who calls himself an eternal optimist – is confident travel advisories around the globe will be lifted in time for the jolly toymaker and his reindeer to fly under the radar and arrive late on Christmas Eve to deliver presents to children who avoided the 2020 naughty list.

However, cancellation of such favorite start of December events as the live Christmas tree lighting ceremony at Gilkey Square, La Conner Rotary Club's Pancake Breakfast with Santa at Maple Hall and the Swinomish Yacht Club's lighted Christmas Boat Parade will definitely lower Santa's local profile.

Town officials are adapting as best they can to pandemic guide-

lines.

Town Administrator Scott Thomas said that instead of the live tree lighting there will be a virtual one.

"There will be a tree and it will go up this week and be decorated," Thomas told the Weekly News on Monday. "Usually it's a live event with a countdown, but this year it will be on-line."

The Virtual La Conner Tree Lighting Ceremony is scheduled for Saturday from 5-5:15 p.m., according to the Chamber of Commerce website. Log onto www.lovelaconner.com to view the tree lighting.

Santa Claus has been driven to the live tree lighting by members of La Conner Hook & Ladder. He has also been guest of honor at Rotary's annual Pancake Breakfast with Santa gathering on the first Saturday of December.

"Unfortunately," Thomas said, "we're not going to be able to do that."

To help offset the disappointment, Rotary Club members plan

to place banners in town that can be used as backdrops for family Christmas photos that ordinarily would have been taken on Santa's knee, said Thomas.

Thomas said the Chamber's annual "Jingle Belles" shopping getaway in November was scuttled due to COVID-19.

"We've had so many things planned (for the holidays)," he said, "but a lot of those things have gone out the window."

This month's events calendar has been pared down so much that Thomas had little upon which to report during the Town Council's tele-conferenced Nov. 24 meeting.

"So many events have been canceled here," Thomas told Council, "that there's relatively little to report on."

Still, Thomas and Hayes note that the lights have not been completely turned off in regard to Christmas this year.

Far from it.

They point out that Rainbow

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THAT IS WHY THEY CALL THEM SNOW GEESE – More than a flurry, a blizzard of snow geese gathered, coming and going on the outskirts of Conway in late November on a blue-blue sky day near the Fir-Conway Lutheran Church. One of our outstanding nature photographers at work. – Photo by Sarah Walls

Businesses: apply for grants

Grants of up to \$20,000 are available to small businesses from the Working Washington Small Business Grants fund. Eligible business are those most impacted by the state's 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. Nonprofits in these sectors can also apply. Revenues from 2019 must be under \$5 million.

Grant will cover expenses or costs incurred due to COVID-19 and that were necessary to continue business operations.

The fund totals \$70 million.

Application and information: www.commerce.wa.gov/bizgrants.

Source: Washington Department of Commerce