



San Juan County takes the lead in state vaccination rates



BRENDAN COWAN/CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A San Juan Island vaccine clinic.

BY SIENNA BOUCHER
Staff reporter

Vaccine distribution in San Juan County has been a bit more unique than elsewhere, with health department staff members and National Guard traveling on whale-watching boats and school buses to roll out vaccines. Despite the odds, San Juan County is the most vaccinated county in the state.

"San Juan County got off to a great start on the vaccination effort because we got this tremendous support from the Washington National Guard and the State Department of Health to bring up some mass vaccination teams," said San Juan County Health Department Director Brendan Cowan.

Currently, according to data from the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 75.1 percent of the island population is vaccinated. This is 15% higher than in the rest of Washington state.

By the end of this week, there will be 6,000 islanders receiving their booster shot, according to Cowan.

"It is important to remember that the vaccination effort is ongoing and the work has never really let up," he said. "The shifting rules around vaccine eligibility and need for booster shots mean that vaccine clinics are still going strong."

While San Juan County is currently in the lead for vaccination rates, the road to reaching that goal was rocky.

Without large pharmacies or health care providers able to offer large vaccination clinics, the islands struggled with pulling ahead at first, which some islanders were concerned about. Despite that, Cowan would like to recognize Friday Harbor Drug, Ray's Pharmacy and Lopez pharmacy for putting in hard work to vaccinate as many people as they could with their small operations.

Once the National Guard came to help in 2021, they gave 10,000 shots throughout the county, which means two-thirds to three-quarters of vaccinations were given by the National Guard.

"It was kind of a hurdle but it ended up being a really great thing," he said.

Cowan said the whole process still had a fair amount of island flair.

"Ivan Rice, who has a whale-watching business, was taking National Guard soldiers from island to island on his boat, then getting on a school bus that we borrowed from the Orcas School District," he laughed. "Then when we arrived at the Orcas Center, the director there had organized volunteer musicians to play pleasant music in the vaccine clinics. It was just a cool island thing. It was pretty neat."

Cowan said that despite the issues with winter storms and ferry schedules making it difficult for the National Guard to get out to the islands, they loved interacting with the community, which he thinks also gave them the motivation to return. The community showed appreciation through giving meals, music and verbal support.

"To see it reflected in those folks who'd seen lots of other operations — they were very delighted with the way that things went here. It made me proud to be an islander," he said.

With still more vaccines and boosters to roll out, Cowan said is confident that the energy of the community will continue to be successful in battling the pandemic as islanders know how to come together to make things happen.

"We're not out of this yet," he said. "But just to have come as far as we have is a testament to lots of things but vaccination rate is certainly one of them and maybe the most important one."

Decatur residents continue to search for mail solutions

BY SIENNA BOUCHER
Staff reporter

Some Decatur Island residents have been expressing concern over changes that have been made to their mail system put in place by the Decatur Shores Community Association.

Decatur is not served by the state ferry system. The first post office was established in 1891 and remained until 1969. Since then a one-drop postal system in a small shed was instituted and mail was delivered by boat and plane via a contracted employee, not a postal service worker. Now, items are no longer delivered to the island free of charge. Instead, an annual fee has been instituted. Otherwise, packages and letters are kept at the post office in Anacortes.

Bruce Robertson, who handles communication for the DSCA, wrote in an email to Decatur residents, "DSCA has provided the facility for receiving mail and packages as a free service for many years. In the last few years, particularly with the dramatic increase in packages, it has become burdensome to the association, so while it continues to be committed to hosting the service, DSCA can no longer provide it at no cost."

Robertson told the Journal, "Well, the thing is, it's not our responsibility. What we were offering was facilities that we have and the use of the facilities and people that didn't want to take up our offer, had a choice to figure out what they wanted to do."

The choices that Robertson referred to were listed to Decatur residents in an email from Robertson on Oct. 2. The DSCA is asking residents who are non-DSCA members to pay an annual fee of \$75 in order to use their mailboxes. Members of the DSCA are considered covered through their annual membership fee of \$700.

If residents do not pay the fee,

then they will have to gather their mail in Anacortes.

The mail shed is on DSCA's property, leaving that entity in control of decisions regarding the structure. According to Susanne Paxman, director of the DSCA, this fee was put in place to pay for the cost of reconstructing a new mail shed due to not being able to keep up with the growing influx of mail and rising accounts of theft.

Prior to constructing the new mail shed, Paxman said there was a meeting held in 2017 consulting the community about these plans.

Robertson said he does not think there were meetings about the mail shed after 2017.

Annie Austin, a longtime weekend resident of Decatur, said the new set up does not accommodate the elderly population of Decatur. She said that if residents do not wish to pay the fee, then they may have a hard time receiving important mailed items such as prescriptions, as the trip to Anacortes is expensive and weather-dependent.

Decatur residents, members of the DSCA and USPS have continued to be at odds over the situation.

Anacortes Postmaster James Woody wrote in an email to a resident of Decatur that was shared with the Journal, "I have been unsuccessful in speaking with the San Juan Public Works Admin. He has not returned my calls or responded to my emails. The DSCA is putting the new policy into effect tomorrow 12/1. I was trying to resolve this issue prior to that date, but again I have been unsuccessful. I have not laid this issue to rest and will continue to work on it, however, I need the cooperation of San Juan County and the Public Works department to relocate the shed on county maintained property with road access that has no easement claimed by any association of Decatur Island."

He also wrote that he receives

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Environmentally friendly tactics for 'burning smart'

BY SIENNA BOUCHER
Staff reporter

While the main source of air pollution in the summer months may be apparent with smoke



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from forest fires visible in the sky, the main source of air pollution in the winter months is a little less noticeable, as it comes from those trying to keep their homes warm.

"In much of Washington, the major wintertime threat from air pollution comes from wood-burning from the home heating from our wood stoves, and in some places, people may burn brush outside," said Andy Wineke, an environmental scientist working for the Washington State Department of Ecology who specializes in air pollution and burning.

Burning brush outside is not legal in urbanized areas but is in rural spaces. Eventually, he said, the air pollution gets trapped under the surface of the atmosphere and builds up over time.

To keep an eye on this, Washington ecologists work with atmospheric scientists, the National Weather Service, the Forest Service and commercial burning professionals who burn for agricultural purposes. When they spot these pollution issues building up in the atmosphere, burn bans are reinstated. These can still occur during the winter.

To be able to start a fire but not add to the build of pollution, Wineke said there are many tips to allow that to happen. One of the most important ones is to make sure to burn with dry wood and never burn trash.

"Burning trash releases so



PHOTO BY GUSTAVO ZAMBELLI ON UNSPLASH

many unsafe chemicals that get trapped in your lungs," he said.

In the Pacific Northwest, there is more wood, such as pine, that contains lots of resin, which makes for more smokey burning

than harder woods available elsewhere. Creating too much smoke also poses a threat to both the health of individuals and the environment.

"But, you know, it's what we

have here," he said. "So just make sure you're burning hot."

Maintaining a hot fire is more efficient and produces much less smoke, said Wineke.

"It's just these tiny particles and they're so small, you inhale them and they actually get past your body's natural defenses," he said. "They get launched into your lungs, your bloodstream. People with pre-existing health or heart issues are most susceptible to damage those particles."

Pregnant women, small children, and the elderly are also very susceptible to the health impacts of air pollution.

Burning hot can be done by creating a specialized fire pit or investing in a quality wood stove, and newer wood stoves tend to stay cleaner. Wineke said he himself uses a stainless steel stove, which burns really hot and produces almost no smoke.

"I think in recent years we've all gotten to experience more wildfire smoke than we would have liked — 2020 was pretty horrific," he remarked, adding that he urges people to remember the implications of having so much smoke in the air and what that felt like as motivation to burn more smartly.

"It's important to be good neighbors," he said. "Make sure you're burning correctly."

More information, including burn bans, can be found at www.ecology.wa.gov.