

# POLICE BLOTTER

SKAGIT COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

**Monday, October 4**

**3:38 p.m.: What the crap?** – Caller reported someone had smeared feces on her door. The caller believes it is her old tenants. McLean Rd., Greater La Conner.

**Tuesday, October 5**

**7:55 a.m.: Happened last night** – Caller reported a cold vehicle prowler. Channel Dr., La Conner.

**10:46 a.m.: Bike theft** – Caller reported a shed had been entered and a \$500 bike stolen. The bike is described as being green with black trim. Morris St., La Conner.

**3:03 p.m.: Trick, not treat** – Caller reported a junk vehicle left on their property. S. 3rd St., La Conner.

**Wednesday, October 6**

**7:28 p.m.: Potential prowler?** – Washington State Patrol reported a suspicious vehicle. Deputies checked for the vehicle but were unable to locate it. Bay View Edison Rd., Bay View.

**Thursday, October 7**

**11:12 a.m.: There, not here** – Caller originally reported a robbery at gun point. Deputies determined this incident occurred in the city of Mount Vernon. McLean Rd., Greater La Conner.

**12:54 p.m.: Good deed punished** – Caller gave a hitch hiker a ride into La Conner. The next morning the caller discovered she was missing her wallet and her bank cards had been used. Investigation continuing. La Conner.

**Sunday, October 10**

**8:23 a.m.: Mean streak** – Caller reported several vehicles with broken windows. 1st St., La Conner.

**12:42 p.m.: Cold bad news** – Caller reported a cold vehicle prowler. Bay View Edison Rd., Bay View.

**2:39 p.m.: Bad trick. Bad!** – Caller reported tombstone Halloween decorations stolen from the front of her business. A pet groomer. Morris St., La Conner.

## Staff. . . (From Page 1)

the money you are taking home has gone down, you start looking for something else to do," he said of his staff.

The Slider Café is small, doesn't serve dinner or alcohol and has only eight employees. Still, owner Pat Ball says he gets "almost zero response from help wanted ads. If it wasn't for my current staff recommending friends and acquaintances, I would be in trouble."

The retail sector is also understaffed. The NAPA store staff is "just me," says manager Steve Horton. "I usually have another guy, but they are short staffed in Burlington so he went there."

The downtown Mount Vernon NAPA store closed recently, after "everybody quit, one guy retired and there was nobody to run it." Horton expects that closure to be permanent.

La Conner Drug could use another pharmacy assistant or technician. Assistant Talia Bill says that when pharmacy technical staffer Winona Knippers worked remotely to handle all the extra paper and digital work created by giving vaccines, only two

people staffed the store. That is not nearly enough.

At Roozengaarde last spring, "I was parking people, selling flowers, doing everything except my job," said manager Brent Roozen. Low staff levels continue to affect fall bulb packing.

The La Conner School District website shows a dozen openings, several for substitutes.

"We should have another eight jobs listed, but for two months we have been without the HR payroll specialist who would post these positions," said human resources director Brian Gianello.

The culprit is the COVID-19 pandemic. Even with mitigation efforts, people have concerns about working in schools. While everyone is careful and temperatures of students and staff are checked daily, "we have had a couple positive test results," he said. No one has been seriously ill, but any positive test means "that person is out for 10 days and we are looking for somebody to fill that spot."

All the county's districts "are casting the same net and competing against one another for paraprofessionals, food service employees and transportation drivers," he notes.

# Hard to eat out or in if the food isn't delivered

By Anne Basye

When Pat Ball of the Slider Café visited the wholesale US Food warehouse store in Burlington last summer, all he saw were empty shelves.

"It looked like they were going out of business," he said.

Ball and David Kas of The Fork at Skagit Bay are two among millions of restaurant owners at the receiving end of COVID-19-induced supply chain and transportation problems. Mustard, catsup and caramel are out of stock one week. The next it's toilet paper, pizza boxes and straws. Or they are on back order. Or they are shown on the shipping manifest, but are not on the truck.

It is frustrating. Owners and wait staff cannot give customers what they want. Customers are not always gracious about that.

"One day I got a call from a food rep saying 'hey, I'm not delivering to you, we don't have the staff,'" Ball explained. "Now I get my deliveries, but when I place my order, I don't know if I'm going to actually get my product until the truck comes in."

"I went weeks not being able to find flour and we bake everything: pizza dough, burger buns and sandwich loaves," said Kas. "Dinner forks have been on back order for four months."

Ball has taken time off to drive to Kent for supplies. Both Ball and Kas do some of their shopping in grocery stores, which are better stocked. And when they see something they need, they buy all of it, no matter what the price.

"Six months ago, cooking oil for hash browns and eggs was \$10.35 a gallon," said Ball. "Now I'm paying \$18 a gallon."

One reason for these glitches is that the food supply chain has made two major pivots. "During

the lockdown, when everybody was eating at home, the direction and focus shifted from institutional to retail," explained this reporter's sister-in-law, Carol Limanowski, who works for US Foods in Chicago. "When we started to open state by state, retail and wholesale food service were pulling from the same source."

She notes that food producers are still rebuilding their inventory and that distribution jobs like warehouse pickers and receiving clerks are hard to fill, that "these are physical jobs working in freezers and refrigerators, not for your average Joe."

Trucking is a major sticking point. "There is so much business that carriers cannot carry all the orders," she said. "Everybody is in line waiting for a truck."

"America was 60,000 truckers short before COVID and it is probably twice that bad now," said Dean Swanson of the Swanson Family Farm, whose off-farm job is in the trucking industry.

Swanson says current long-haul drivers are reaching retirement age and younger people don't want to be away from home 27 days a month. Immigrants are stepping up to fill the jobs.

"Say you are a doctor in Syria and you come here," he said. "You don't get to be a doctor but you can drive a semi."

When a truck breaks down, it's hard to lease a replacement, which means many regular food service routes go undelivered.

Liability is another concern. "Some owners would rather have a truck sitting than have someone who's not really qualified behind the wheel," said Swanson.

Washington's remoteness, compared to central states like Missouri and Texas, is also a problem. "Does a truck want to travel 1,000 miles to get a load of potatoes to haul 1,500

miles the opposite direction?"

John Thulen hopes the answer to that question is yes.

"We are really at the mercy of semi drivers," said the Pioneer Potatoes owner. "If you can't get the potatoes off your dock, you can't get them to Los Angeles or Seattle."

Thulen says the one-two punch of a labor shortage and transportation problems is affecting perishable crops like leaf lettuce that must be picked and shipped within 24 hours.

Agricultural plastic, packaging and tractor parts that used to arrive in six weeks now take 24 or 30 weeks. "We have farm equipment from Italy and Germany. When something breaks down, you just hope there is a part sitting on some shelf in the U.S., instead of in a container ship waiting for customs."

About 70 such ships are now waiting to enter ports in Southern California. "It takes one to three days to unload a container ship if the entire supply chain is ready to unload, but longer if there are not enough longshoremen and truckers," said Scott Price of Edward Jones in La Conner.

Once unloaded, containers from ships in Seattle are trucked to distribution centers in Kent, where their contents are separated and segregated onto other trucks for final delivery. A lack of distribution staff and drivers slows this process too.

"It's a whole bunch of small issues that should be solvable, but when you pile on that many at once, it's a different story. I think it might take two years or more to fix this mess," said Swanson.

"It's almost becoming normal," said Calico Cupboard manager Hilary Freed. "Every week it's something new. If we can't find an ingredient, we just change our recipes."

"We've all just figured out a way to deal with it."

So where are all the workers?

Several factors are at play, says Edward Jones' Price, citing national economic data. A steadily decreasing birth rate means fewer people entering the job market. A huge wave of experienced workers have retired early, leaving the job market. An increase in the national savings rate, driven in part by stimulus payments

and unemployment, means people are pickier about the job they take.

And being picky is the story for many people, says Price. "Workers are re-evaluating what they want to do, especially restaurant workers and service employees, who are moving away from that industry."

One exception to local trends is John Thulen of Pioneer Potatoes. He

has plenty of people driving potatoes from field to plant this year – all men whose dads drove for his dad, Gale.

A more worrisome issue for his workforce is the impact of new agricultural worker overtime laws that go into effect in January.

"We will adapt," he said. "The sky is not falling. We just have to figure out how to catch it!"

# Did you know?

You can get your Flu and COVID-19 vaccines on the same day! There's no need to wait!

## Protect yourself against COVID-19 and the flu.

A yearly flu vaccine is recommended for everyone aged six-months and older, including pregnant and nursing people. If you are 65 or older, talk to your provider about flu vaccine and other important vaccines for your age group.



**Vaccinate WA**  
CovidVaccineWA.org

To find a COVID-19 vaccine provider, go to:  
**www.vaccinelocator.doh.wa.gov**