



# NISQUALLY VALLEY NEWS

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## District Faces Public Outcry Over Fall Reopening Plan

Current DOH Rules Require Face Coverings for Students in School Settings

By Daniel Warn dan@yelmonline.com

Members of a local anti-mask group presented the Yelm School Board with a petition featuring 301 signatures that asked the district to turn down mask-wearing mandates in schools, and to reject criti-

cal race theory and comprehensive sexual health education teaching methodologies in the district. The July 22 meeting was standing-



Superintendent Brian Wharton

room only, as people filtered into the hallway of the district office from a contingent of people ostensibly from the group serving the petition. Andrew Greulich, one of the group's members, announced a bid to challenge the seat of school board member Mark Rohwedder as a write-in candidate

in the face of what Greulich called Rohwedder's failure to protect kids from mask-wearing mandates and other educational initiatives. Current Washington State Department of Health (DOH) rules require masks ■ SEE SCHOOLS, PAGE A13

## Yelm Fills New Commission Focused on the Arts

By Daniel Warn dan@yelmonline.com

The city of Yelm approved its new arts commissioners at a recent council meeting, a milestone that has been a long time coming, according to Arts Commissioner Steve Craig.

Craig said he had gone to the city months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and requested they enact an ordinance to create the commission. Though interested and invested in the arts, the city said they didn't have the staffing available at that time, so Craig said he would staff the initiative.

"I went about, with the blessing of the city, gathering information from other communities and looking at other ordinances elsewhere and then pulling together what I thought would be appropriate for Yelm in the form of a draft ordinance," Craig said. "And so I submitted that to the city and the city has kind of taken ... some variation on that into the existing ordinance. When that came about, the pandemic hit, so at that time, they were already soliciting people who were interested in becoming a member of the commission, but the pandemic sort of precluded it from actually happening."

The arts commission is now staffed, although a firm date for its first meeting has not yet been decided.

Craig, Rob Corl, Heidi

■ SEE ARTS, PAGE A13

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## Nisqually Valley BBQ Rally Draws in Thousands



Daniel Warn / Nisqually Valley News

More than 8,000 people came out to the Nisqually Valley BBQ Rally on Saturday, July 24.

By Daniel Warn dan@yelmonline.com

More than 8,000 people came out to the second Nisqually Valley BBQ Rally on Saturday, July 24, at Yelm City Park and the surrounding streets.

The event, hosted by the Yelm Chamber of Commerce, featured live music, prizes, professional barbecue vendors, carnival games, and pie-eating and amateur-barbecue contests, as well as other community offerings like the Yelm Farmers Market.

"It was an amazing day in the park," said Line Roy, Yelm Chamber of Commerce executive director. "The bands were incredible. It was so awesome to look across Yelm City Park and see people enjoying the music, the vendors (and) the food."

Yelm Chamber President

Dan Nicholson said the rally was outstanding.

"The event was an amazing success," Nicholson said. "I'm overwhelmed with gratitude to everyone who helped, volunteered, sponsored,

■ SEE BBQ, PAGE A6



A man eats a turkey leg during the Nisqually Valley BBQ Rally held at Yelm City Park on July 24.



Kaeley Schultz, from Rainier, competes in the kids pie eating contest on Saturday, July 24.

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Volume 99, Issue No. 31



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## SCHOOLS:

Continued From Page A1

or cloth facial coverings for staff and students in school settings, where students are present indoors, regardless of vaccination status.

During the meeting, Superintendent Brian Wharton presented the district's fall reopening plan, taken directly from guidelines passed down from the DOH.

Some community members disrupted the presentation with complaints on multiple occasions as they voiced their displeasure with the reopening plan.

"I don't personally think that attacking school board members and things like that is appropriate," Wharton said in an interview with the Nisqually Valley News. "I don't think anyone has the right to disrupt a public meeting."

According to Wharton's presentation, the district plans to enact a full reopening in the fall. It will reinstate the 2019-20 school start and end times, without a K-5 virtual school entity, but with a secondary remote learning option.

In the reopening plan, a daily attestation of health is no longer required for staff and students, but there will be a testing option for those who are presenting symptoms or those who are worried for their health.

While masks are required for students and staff indoors, they are not required outdoors regardless of vaccination status. This differs from current CDC guidelines which allow for vaccinated individuals to forgo wearing masks indoors.

Employees are required to follow Washington State Labor and Industries (L&I) requirements to provide an attestation of vaccination status to forgo wearing masks in areas students are not present.

Physical distancing of 3 feet is required indoors between students whenever possible, with adults remaining at 6 feet of distance.

Strict ventilation requirements will be followed to the maximum capacity of facility HVAC systems and all schools will continue to change filters during the year.

The district will cooperate with Thurston County Public Health and Social Services to



At left, people pack the school board meeting of the Yelm Community Schools on July 22. At right, councilmembers chat before the Yelm Community Schools board of directors meeting.



Daniel Warn / Nisqually Valley News

contact trace all student and staff COVID-19 cases, reporting all known cases to the health department. The definition of close contact is currently for those within 6 feet of an infected individual for at least 15 minutes within 24 hours.

Thurston County Public Health and Social Services determines which students or staff need to be quarantined and their date of return. However, vaccinated people will not be required to quarantine.

"We don't think what DOH has published for summer and fall reopening ... is the final document that they will publish," Wharton said in the interview. "I think (it will change) once or twice between now and the opening of school."

During the public comment portion of the meeting, the "Unmask Our Kids" group's leader Sarah Greulich said DOH guidelines are optional for districts, citing law RCW 28A.320.015, which states a school district can make policy for the sake of effective education and instruction that does not interfere with law.

Sarah Greulich said because the guidelines are not drafted into law, the district has the option to not follow them.

"As a board, you have the right to make masks optional, veto sex (education), make sure the children are not (taught critical race theory), and it is your job to protect and educate our kids," she said. "You are currently failing all of our families."

DOH Public Information Officer Ginny Streeter said in an email to the Nisqually Valley News that the guidelines are not

optional.

"All school districts in the state are required by the governor's proclamation to follow/use the most up-to-date COVID-19 school guidance," Streeter wrote. "The guidance set forth by the state outlines the minimum requirements for school districts. However, the school district, school board, local health jurisdiction and local health officer do have the authority to enact stricter guidance."

After allegedly talking to L&I and the DOH, Sarah Greulich said the agencies confirmed for her that following the guidelines is essentially an option for districts.

Streeter said she inquired about the contents of a possible conversation between Sarah Greulich and DOH.

"I reached out to our assistant secretary for COVID-19 response regarding some individuals claiming at a school board meeting that DOH personnel told them that the mask guidance is optional," Streeter said. "She states that she is not aware of any instance where DOH employees stated that the mask guidance is optional."

Sarah Greulich said the consequences of not following the guidelines amount to little more than a slap on the wrist.

"I don't think you guys understand the repercussions of what will happen if you turn this down," she said at the meeting. "So, after speaking to them and their legal team, the only repercussion you could possibly have is possible fines."

Wharton explained that's not the case. He said district

personnel could be charged with a gross misdemeanor if the guidelines are not followed because of a governor's proclamation, which enforced DOH guidelines.

"If we were to go counter to the department of health and Labor and Industries, the district, as a group, could face penalty and individuals could face penalty," Wharton said. "It goes beyond being cited for a gross misdemeanor. It opens the district up to any type of suit that someone is claiming they got sick from COVID because we didn't follow the regulations. And that is a massive concern. ... We could lose our protections under insurance by disregarding department of health and Labor and Industries guidelines."

Sarah Greulich said the district has fallen down on its job.

"You have given in to the pressure from the teacher's unions, Jay Inslee, L&I, local doctors, state and local DOH, (Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction) and the government," she said.

Wharton said in the interview it's common sense to follow the guidelines of experts.

"Our position throughout the whole pandemic is that we're going to follow the guidance of public health officials," he said. "That's their job, is to know the science and know the data and make those rules. And we follow them."

Furthermore, Sarah Greulich said kids are not "super-spreaders" and masks do not filter out particles as small as those that carry the COVID-19 virus.

The DOH says a mask's roll

is to filter out droplets that carry the virus.

Public commenter Christina Jackson said she told her child to sneak breaths by pulling down his mask during school because he had trouble breathing since he wasn't allowed to take it off.

"I won't do that this year," Jackson said. "I cannot put him through that."

Concerns about the effects of mask-wearing on children's physical and psychological health were also raised.

Wharton said he is disheartened by the alleged misinformation being spread.

"I don't believe that people are being held accountable for their untrue statements in this," he said in the interview. "I think that (the district is) trying to provide as much true information as we can. There's a lot of misinformation."

Throughout the meeting, attendees said the district was not listening to them.

"I think they absolutely were listened to," Wharton said. "There's a difference between being listened to and getting what you want. ... I don't think we're going to find a lot of people that like wearing masks. I don't. But I think they were definitely listened to, and that's why the board directed me to consult our legal counsel, to consult our risk management group, to consult state associations (and) to consult other districts."

"We did that because we listened. We just came to a different point of view ... (and) we're at a different position than what that group is trying to persuade us to take."

## ARTS:

Continued From Page A1

Haslinger-Corl, Deborah Baker and Jane Walker were the commissioners appointed to fulfill the ordinance.

"Personally, I'm pretty excited about ... the arts commission, because the potential for the arts in this community is quite high," Craig said. "There's a lot of talent here, whether you are talking about theater, or sculpture, or painting or dance, you name it. In the artistic realm, there's a lot of talent here."

He said his hopes are high for the arts to blossom in Yelm, which has always invested in arts.

"One of the things I'm hopeful of is we, as a community, make a commitment to public art," Craig said. "I read a biography of an individual artist who said art should exist in prisons, in factories, in schools, in shopping centers. We should be surrounded by art, especially these days, because art can be a kind of softening tonic to what is going on in society. ... Public art is something I'm hopeful about."

One of the things he wants to do right away with the commission is revitalize the water tower, which he said is "rusting away and forlorn."

Knowing the tower was registered as a historic icon for the city on the state historic registry and that the city has gathered the funds to paint it, he has made a determination to light up the sky with its presence.

"Not only will it be a historical icon, but I think it will be kind of an artistic icon as well, because with computerized lighting we're going to be able to do a variety of lighting scenarios throughout the year and it can be programmed for special occasions, like New Years, Fourth of July, etc."

Craig owns the building that used to house the triad theater, known as the Wolf Building,

*"There's a lot of talent here, whether you are talking about theater, or sculpture, or painting or dance, you name it. In the artistic realm, there's a lot of talent here."*

ARTS COMMISSIONER  
STEVE CRAIG

which was once the location of the city's grocery and general store. Recently, he hired an artist to paint the "Gateway to Mount Rainier" mural on the building's side, marking the sort of thing he would like to see all over Yelm.

He would also like to see the building used as a space for public art again. The theater group "Standing Room Only" is in talks with the occupant of the Wolf Building to hopefully use the space for future performances, Craig said.

"It could be a bridge to something more permanent," he said.

"I support the development of a theater here in town, a performing arts center, if you will. I know that there are a lot of people kind of quietly having a conversation about that subject. Just where it stands at this moment, I don't know, but I think there's enough energy in the community that a performing arts center is very much possible."

Craig said he thinks the arts commission can be instrumental in such a feat.

"See, that's one of the benefits of an arts commission. It has status, which as a function of the city ... we can facilitate contacts with, for example, the state arts commission," he said. "And I'm hoping that when we meet as an arts commission here in Yelm that we will invite representatives from the state arts commission and get a clear understanding of what the funding possibilities are."

He said he wants to connect with other arts commissions that have been successful in their own communities so Yelm's variant doesn't reinvent the wheel when enacting meaningful initiatives of public art.

Craig takes an annual trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico, to network with the officers of art there, in a city Craig said boasts the highest concentration of the arts west of New York City.

"I meet very interesting people," he said. "The last time that I went, which was in June, I met a person who owns a gallery down there, but he also happens to be the president of the Northwest

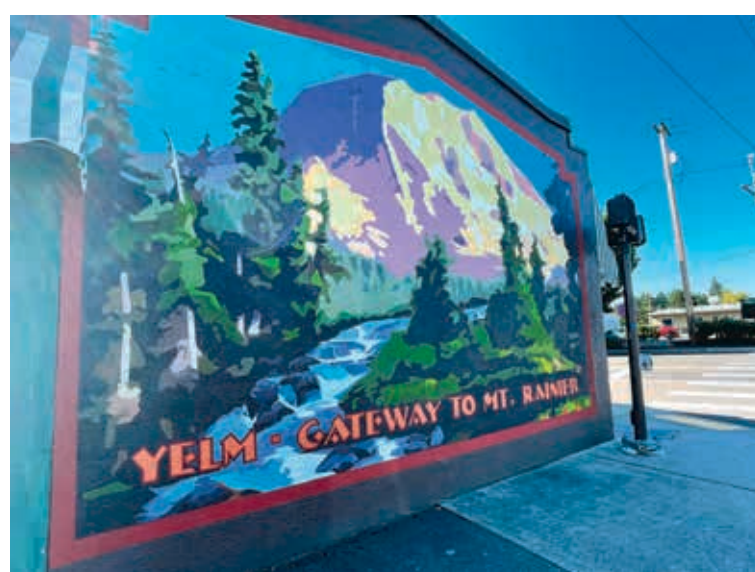


Photo by Daniel Warn / dan@yelmonline.com

Arts Commissioner Steve Craig had a mural painted on the Wolf building prior to his time on the commission.

College of Arts and Design in Tacoma. I think that what I can perhaps contribute is making connections to people who can support the arts in a direct way and possibly finically."

He said he'll bring all his networking and discovery with him into the arts commission, and is eager to work with the other commissioners to see what they'll bring with them.

"That's what I think I can bring to the table, you know, working with the community, other artists, other supporters of the arts — patrons if you will — to promote the arts in every way in our community," Craig said. "Dance, theater, all forms of artistic expression are fair game. Who knows how that's going to play out. I look forward to the commission meeting and having that conversation and seeing

what kind of traction we get and what priorities there might be in terms of how we engage."

On a personal note, Craig said he surrounds himself with art. A biologist by trade, he has memories of painting a mural in the hallways of his grade school. Though he didn't pursue art as a career path, he has great respect for those who do, since art is how humans make themselves known, he said.

"Art is an interesting expression of the human psyche," Craig said. "I was just thinking about it recently, and even if you go back thousands of years — what have we discovered in caves? Art. Cave men and women were into art and of all the things that were left behind, the most obvious, in many cases, is the art that they left behind where they were living in those caves."