

# Mask dispute postpones school board meeting

## Board directors: State funding tied to health guidelines

BY MICHAEL DASHIELL  
Sequim Gazette

Concern from community members about a statewide mask mandate for students — as well as vaccination requirements for school staff and other state employees — continues to be a hot topic at Sequim School Board meetings.

A dispute over whether attendees of a Sept. 7 in-person board meeting needed to wear masks to be in attendance got heated enough that board president Brandino Gibson canceled the remainder of the regularly-scheduled meeting a few minutes in, and law enforcement were called to the scene of the district's boardroom at 503 N. Sequim Ave.

One of the audience members, later identified as Anthony Banker, was asked to put on a mask. He said he had a medical exemption from wearing a mask and attempted to provide the board with information from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regarding the effectiveness of various forms of masks.

"You cannot kick me out because of a medical reason," Banker told school board members. "It's discrimination. All I want to do is sit here and listen."

Banker and several others asked Gibson for more explanations about the board's meeting mask requirement, and after several minutes school officials closed the meeting.

"We wanted to hear what people say," Gibson said in an interview following the meeting. "I told them, 'We want to hear what you have to say but this is not safe.' At that point

it was just shut it down."

Gibson said earlier this week, "As the board chair I felt it was unsafe for those involved in the meeting at the time." Other board members supported Gibson's decision at a rescheduled meeting this week.

Dr. Jane Pryne, interim superintendent for the Sequim School District, said at a meeting this week that she called 9-1-1 as the Sept. 7 meeting devolved; after pulling her mask down to try to speak to the dispatch officer, someone took a photo and posted it on Facebook with "nasty posts" and follow-up emails, she said.

"Remember on social media, there is a human being on the receiving end of those emails (and posts)," she said.

Board members Brian Kuh and Eric Pickens stayed behind to talk with the group of about 25 people concerned about the mask policy. Some had brought signs, one reading "Tyranny spreading faster than the virus."

In an interview after the meeting, Banker said he felt frustrated with the outcome, but noted, "Their discrimination shut it down."

"These board members obviously don't understand the law. The people who took those oaths, if they can't (uphold them), we'll remove them, put people we want in," Banker said. "Because the people have the power."

### Further mask, vaccination discussions

The district held a virtual-only Zoom meeting to conclude board action on Sept. 13, when public comments continued to address mask-

ing and vaccination requirements.

Matt Crowell lauded the board for following COVID safety guidelines.

"This is our first year at Sequim schools — thank you, you made our move and start of school year a first-class event. I want to praise the staff implementation of COVID safety protocols. There really is no playbook for how to do things."

Eliza Klinger asked the district to follow its own civil rights policy and accept religious exemptions for the statewide mandate for state employees to be vaccinated against COVID-19. (K-12 educators, school staff, coaches, bus drivers, school volunteers and others working in school facilities have until Oct. 18 to be fully vaccinated as a condition of employment.)

"Our job as individuals as a society is to respect beliefs even if we don't understand (them)," Klinger said.

"They deserve to be here as much as any other employee," she said. "A one-side fits all mandate does not help any district to operate."

Parent Michael Rocha asked the board to have some common sense and leeway for their masking policy, particularly when it comes to the youngest students.

"I don't feel comfortable putting (my kindergartner) into school because I don't want their first experience to be wearing a mask," he said Monday.

"The younger kids they don't wear them properly; we know this."

Gibson said disregarding the masking requirement could put the Sequim School District and other districts across the state in jeopardy. "There is money tied to this," he

said Monday night, referring to a document from Inslee and state superintendent Chris Reykdal.

"Basically it outlines the ... repercussions for not following through with the mandate," Gibson said, detailing a loss of basic education dollars from the state for every day in non-compliance after unheeded warnings from state officials.

"We can't operate our school without money; that is not the option, to complete go against the order," Gibson said.

"We're all in a tough situation and working toward a remedy for this," he said. "But we have our kids in school ... the last thing we want to do is send the back home."

Pickens noted that the school district would be put in financial dire straights were it to fail to enforce the mask requirement.

"It's been made very clear to us as a school district, if we don't follow the safety protocols, we will not be covered by insurance company," he said Monday.

The cost alone of covering the district, regardless of any potential legal action, would be cost prohibitive, he said.

"We do have to consider those aspects," Pickens said.

"No mystery about how I feel, that these decisions should be at a local level," Kuh added Monday.

"But state has the power in those situations."

We'll continue to do the best we can with what we have. I think we'll be just fine if we focus on our students and what's best for them."

Board director Larry Jeffryes said he supports the state health requirements.

"If that means masking up (and) getting vaccinated, then that's what we need to do to protect those kids,"

he said.

"I want to keep them in school. That means the community needs to step up and get COVID under control so those kids can stay in school."

### Student, staff COVID tracking

The Sequim School District posts weekly updates of students and staff with confirmed positive COVID tests at its home page (sequim-schools.org).

Pryne said the district is looking to start a "Learn to Return" program that, if given parent permission, a student with symptoms would be given a rapid COVID test. That program isn't ready quite yet because staff has not yet had training, which could happen in the next two to three weeks," Pryne said.

If a student is reported COVID positive the school performs contact tracing, Pryne said; previously county officials and volunteers would do so but they are overwhelmed at this point, she said.

Sequim schools reverted from in-person learning to a remote model in November 2020 when Clallam County's two-week infection rate was listed at 149 per 100,000.

As of Sept. 14, 2021, Clallam's case rate per 100,000 is 1,239.

Pryne said for Sequim schools to revert to a remote model again, Dr. Allison Berry, the health officer for Clallam and Jefferson counties, advised that there would have to be multiple outbreaks and multiple grade levels.

"Then she will contemplate closing the schools (as we won't be able to keep those (cases) contained)," Pryne said.

Pryne and other local school district superintendents meet with Berry every other week, and more often as case counts rise.

## Wiker, future pharmacist, gets P.E.O. Chapter HM scholarship

SEQUIM GAZETTE STAFF

Kalli Wiker, a 2021 Sequim High School graduate, was recently awarded a \$1,250 scholarship from the Sequim P.E.O. Chapter HM.

Wiker started classes at George Fox University in Newberg, Ore., where she is pursuing an undergraduate degree in biochemistry with the intention to complete her graduate studies to become a pharmacist.

"I love people and want to be part of a team who helps promote healthier lives," she said. Wiker She ultimately plans to return to the Olympic Peninsula as a pharmacist to help the area, scholarship representatives said.

Wiker earned a 4.0 grade-point-average at Sequim High while participating in three varsity sports, along with participation in the SHS Select Choir



Sequim High graduate Kalli Wiker, center, accepts a scholarship from the Sequim P.E.O. Chapter HM. Pictured with Wiker are, from left, Pam Grandstrom, Charlotte Hudson, Shirley Sutterlin and Nancy Gilchrist. Submitted photo

and volunteer efforts in the Sequim community.

The Sequim P.E.O. chapter is "dedicated to philanthropic work to help women further their educations," representatives said. The local Chapter HM is part of a

large international nonprofit organization that helps women all over the world.

For more information about Chapter HM and its scholarships, contact president Nancy Gilchrist at ndmuggle@yahoo.com.



## RIDGE RESIDENT

Contributor Susan Hamman captured this image of a marmot on Hurricane Ridge on Sept. 2.

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