



A ramshackle collection of structures and tents housing homeless individuals has overtaken portions of Veterans Park in Port Orchard.

BOB SMITH | INDEPENDENT

Upset by inaction, Putaansuu threatens to take county to court

Mayor says homeless encampment in Veterans Park is a safety and security issue for nearby residents

By BOB SMITH
Kitsap News Group

PORT ORCHARD — After a visit last month to Veterans Park, which sits within the City of Port Orchard, Mayor Rob Putaansuu was frustrated.

And a month later, the mayor's frustration level has only risen. Feeding his dismay is the continuing presence of homeless encampments that line the county-owned and operated park, which houses up to 100 people.

Assurances by Kitsap County's commissioners in late December that the homeless encampments dotting the Veterans Park landscape would be cleaned up and removed have done little to soften his mood. In fact, Putaansuu told the Independent this week that not much has changed at the park since the city's meeting with county commissioners and parks department officials to review a roadmap for how Kitsap County would

mitigate, then remove the encampments.

As frustrated Putaansuu has been over the garbage-strewn, unsightly appearance of the homeless encampments, he says city residents who live next to the greenbelt areas that separate them from the park are even more so as they deal with safety and security issues arising from the encampments.

"I've talked to numerous individuals who live in that area," he said. "If this was next door to you, you'd be just as upset as I am."

In unusually blunt terms, the Port Orchard mayor alleges the homeless people living on county park property have shown little desire to move — and believes many are engaged in criminal activity, including drug use. He said that by camping in the park — free from restrictions that would be imposed on them by homeless shelter personnel — they feel empowered to skirt city regulations and

restrictions.

Putaansuu pointed to the recent spike in property crimes that he said has been fueled by encampment squatters who steal to fund their drug habits.

"Frankly, a lot of these people don't want our help," the mayor said. "They're comfortable with the way things are right now. [Many of them] have serious addiction issues. ... I've seen a lot of people coming and going from there [who] appear to be tweaked out on drugs, in my opinion."

Inaction by county, mayor says

The mayor said he is troubled that Kitsap County — despite officials having created a roadmap to clean up the property — has so far done little to address the issue at the park. Putaansuu said Commissioner Charlotte Garrido, whose district represents Port Orchard, and county officials are addressing the homelessness problem at Veterans Park with long-term solutions when the crisis calls for immediate action.

He said he was bothered during the tour at the park he took last month with

commissioners Garrido and Ed Wolfe, and Doug Washburn, the county's human services director.

"Commissioner Garrido came along and brought a homeless advocate. Walking around hugging these people [at the encampments] when you're engaging with them and handing them food wasn't the purpose of that tour. What I witnessed was, in my opinion, someone wanting to enable what was going on there, which I think is unacceptable in our community."

Putaansuu acknowledged that the county has made some efforts to combat homelessness: it is looking for a homelessness social services navigator; is generating a 1/10th of 1% sales tax funding source for affordable housing in Kitsap County; and is creating a homeless shelter just off Port Orchard's Mile Hill Drive (the center's opening has been delayed until later this year because of supply-chain issues that have impacted its renovation).

Those measures, however, are long-term solutions and won't generate immediate results, he said.

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Staff shortages impacting residents' care at Veterans Home

Wheelchair-bound vet says remaining staff can't keep up with care needs

By MIKE DE FELICE
Kitsap News Group

PORT ORCHARD — Grace Hofer, a wheelchair-bound veteran who resides at Washington Veterans Home in Retsil, considers the state-run facility to be "home."

But for the 78-year-old former Army cook and seven-year resident, the facility most recently has felt less homey and a lot more uncomfortable. That's because she believes caregivers' ability to tend to basic patient hygiene and other needs has taken a back seat due to staff shortages caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The veteran, who served three years in the service in North Carolina and at Fort Lewis, near Tacoma, said she recently has had to endure waits of up to an hour for nursing staff members to respond to her calls for bathroom help. She also had to hang on for nine days before a staff member could break free and help her take a shower.

Like so many others among the community of 190 residents at the veterans' home, the assistance they receive from staff members is essential to their living a comfortable life. And that's especially true for Hofer, who has been in a wheelchair for the past seven years following a car accident and surgery.

Since the start of the pandemic, the veterans' home, like many other operations, has wrestled with staffing issues. But unlike a restaurant where having fewer employees might lead to reduced operating hours or increased wait times for service, when a nursing home has insufficient staffing, the impact on residents is immediate and personal.

"We have been so terribly short on staff, it is getting critical," Hofer said. "There is one person to take care of 20 people, all needing special care and special help, and it just can't be done by one person."

Invariably, though, reduced staffing levels result in service responsibilities that are spread too thin among remaining caregivers.

Toileting and bathing issues

Hofer outlined to the Kitsap News Group a number of instances where the workforce shortage has impacted her care.

"And it's not only my care but others too," she said. "In January, there were two times in one day [where] I had to wait over an hour to go the bathroom."

In order to get help for that chore, Hofer turns on her call light, signaling staff members that their assistance is needed.



BOB SMITH | KITSAP DAILY NEWS

Grace Hofer, a 78-year-old former Army cook and seven-year resident at the Washington Veterans Home in Retsil, says staff shortages have made life more uncomfortable for her and the residents who live there.

Proposed Democratic transportation package would fund Kitsap all-electric passenger ferry

By BOB SMITH
Kitsap News Group

A \$16 billion state transportation revenue package by the Democrats, called Move Ahead Washington, was unveiled by the House and Senate Transportation Committee chairs Tuesday that would include funding to design and construct an all-electric passenger ferry for the Bremerton-to-Seattle route.

The package would provide Kitsap Transit with just over \$3.5 million annually for operations and \$6.5 million to support work on a new electric ferry that would sister with the agency's existing hybrid-electric foot ferry M/V Waterman now operating on the

Port Orchard-Bremerton route.

The package also would add "significant dollars in competitive grants" to Kitsap Transit for electric buses and charging infrastructure, said Kitsap Transit spokesman Sanjay Bhatt in a news release.

State Sen. Emily Randall, 26th District Democrat, and state Rep. Tarra Simmons, 23rd District Democrat, sponsored funding for the all-electric ferry, according to John Clauson, Kitsap Transit executive director.

"This is a historic vote of confidence by our state's legislative leaders in our public transportation sector and the important contribution we make to climate action, economic development

and social equity," Clauson said.

In total, \$1.3 billion is being proposed to build four new hybrid electric ferries for Washington State Ferries and to electrify two existing ships.

In good news for Kitsap County, the proposed transportation package also includes \$75 million in funding for the state Department of Transportation to address public safety, traffic congestion and environmental issues associated with the Gorst highway corridor.

In a social media post, Randall said of the transportation legislation: "It's a package that invests in our future and does not punt the costs to working families (no raised bridge tolls, no raised car

tabs, no gas tax) ..."

The Gorst Coalition, which includes a number of West Sound political leaders and transportation officials, has been working to increase awareness of the so-called "Gorst Mess" over the past year. It is estimated that a transportation project to fix the issue would cost nearly a half-billion dollars.

Additionally, the package includes \$74.3 million for improvements to widen and strengthen SR 3 at Gorst; \$25 million for pedestrians and cyclists on the Warren Avenue Bridge; and \$34 million to improve the SR 3 freight corridor.

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Ferry

CONTINUED FROM 1

Instead of funding the proposed package from a direct tax on gasoline sales, a variety of revenue sources would be tapped, including an industry fuel export tax, and some license and other fee increases. Also, a combination of state and federal funding from the Climate Commitment Act and federal infrastructure funding,

deferred sales tax on some capital projects and a one-time transfer from the state's general fund, would be tapped for the legislation.

The full House and Senate will now review and debate the proposal prior to deciding whether to proceed with the package. Roger Miller, the state's Secretary of Transportation, said the proposed revenue package for Move Ahead Washington is separate from the Supplemental Transportation Budget that is being finalized by the Legislature.



FILE ILLUSTRATION
The package would provide Kitsap Transit with just over \$3.5 million annually for operations and \$6.5 million to support work on a new electric ferry that would sister with the agency's existing hybrid-electric foot ferry M/V Waterman now operating on the Port Orchard-Bremerton route.

Inaction

CONTINUED FROM 1

"We've got to do something now," the mayor said. "This is unacceptable and it shouldn't be acceptable to anybody. The City Council and I are extremely frustrated. We don't want to, but we're prepared to take the county to court over this matter and clean the park ourselves if we have to."

"We don't take [that action] lightly, but the county's got to move on it. It's going to take significant resources to do that, not weekend volunteers picking up trash in the park."

Kitsap County has been playing catchup in enlisting a social-service navigator to tackle the homelessness issue, he said. The mayor asserted that Port Orchard

and other cities in the county, including Poulsbo, have had social-service navigators at work for at least a couple of years.

"There's been progress, but it hasn't been fast enough," he said. "The county has put out dumpsters at the park, but they say the trash needs to be sorted for hazardous materials. Meanwhile, trash has been dumped next to the dumpsters, which is adding to the rodent problem. The garbage needs to go into the dumpsters; the sorting needs to be done somewhere else."

City's hands are tied

Since Veterans Park is a county-owned facility, the city can't make policy or enact measures to resolve the problem. But Port Orchard officials say they are using whatever

tools they have available to spur county action.

The mayor admitted that the scope of the city's code enforcement action is limited to health and safety violations. He said repeated volunteer cleanup work parties will only serve to provide others with a pristine campsite for somebody new to move in, thereby growing the problem, not combatting it.

"The city's role has been to identify and point out the public safety aspect to this," Putaansuu said. "But without some action different than what's going on now — to address the root problem — we're going to be back here in a month or two doing the same thing. That's not how we want to go about this."

"It's a county park within the city limits," Putaansuu said. "We've got an active code enforcement case against the county for health and safety violations. We've got a stream running through there that feeds into Puget Sound. And we've got a well-head protection zone there for West Sound Utility District."

The mayor said the city is in negotiations with a social-services organization called Kitsap Homes of Compassion, which currently provides about 100 beds throughout the county for homeless people.

"They don't currently operate in the city of Port Orchard," he said, "and we're trying to change that. We're going to fund that this year."

A recent court case ruling has made efforts to remove

the homeless encampment more difficult for governmental entities.

A court case ruling by the 9th Circuit Court — Martin v. City of Boise — has significantly impacted what cities can do in response to street homelessness, Putaansuu said. The ruling essentially states that the imposition of criminal penalties for sitting, sleeping or lying outside on public property by homeless individuals who cannot obtain shelter is unconstitutional.

In 2019, a group of cities appealed the case to the U.S. Supreme Court in order to gain clarification on the ruling — including defining what "sufficient" shelter means and how the ruling applies to encampments, which are longer-term places of habitation. The Supreme Court, however, would not take up the case, resulting in the original 9th Circuit precedent remaining in place.

"It appears to me that the county is hiding behind this decision," Putaansuu said of the court case ruling. "But you just can't let our parks turn into homeless encampments. It's just as simple as that."

Kitsap County responds

When contacted by the Independent on Monday, Garrido responded to the query about the park encampment with a written email statement that provided information from Alex Wisniewski, the county's park director, and Washburn.

In response, the directors reported several county actions are taking place at Veterans Park:

- A Kitsap County Human Services team and Kitsap Community Resources outreach team "regularly walk the park and make contact with community members experiencing homelessness to provide services (such as access to shelter beds, referrals for mental health assessments, assistance with getting qualified for benefits — including veterans benefits — and connection with meals and food banks).

- "Regular cleanup events at the park occur every two to three months and have happened since mid-2020," managed by volunteers from Northwest Hospitality and receiving assistance from Kitsap County Parks and Public Works Solid Waste.
- Two dumpsters are located at the park, where trash can be collected and removed on a weekly basis. Volunteers also visit the park weekly to collect trash and sort garbage to ensure it can be placed in the dumpster.

- Four portalets have been placed at two locations in the park.

- "Kitsap County Parks is removing brush and other growth in certain areas of the park to open up site lines and reduce their attraction as encampment locations."

- Sharps containers have been placed at the park to provide a safe location for needles to be deposited.

- The county directors stated that a policy has

been developed to guide a response to unauthorized encampments on county-owned property.

- In addition to funding a homelessness navigator position to lead efforts to remove encampments from the park and other county-owned properties, the directors stated that funds have been approved for an additional encampment outreach team from Kitsap Community Resources. These teams are to provide direct outreach to encampments and offer homeless individuals alternatives to staying on county property.

- The directors also said the new county policy "provides a framework for responding to the legal challenges imposed by the Martin v. City of Boise case that found it illegal to discriminate against or criminalize being homeless" that has rendered legal mechanisms such as ordinances, code and park rules to be ineffective.

- They stated that once the new shelter facility on Mile Hill Drive is opened — and managed by Kitsap Rescue Mission — it "will provide the shelter required before the county enforces park rules and other ordinances."

The 48-acre county park borders Retsil Road Southeast and Southeast Mile Hill Drive, and contains six athletic fields and a picnic area. A portion of the park includes wooded land where a number of tents housing homeless people are situated.

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