



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.

See INACTION | 2

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.

PRRST STD
US Postage
PAID
Sound Publishing
98204

Port Orchard Independent 911 Hildebrand Lane, Suite 202, Blairbridge Is., WA 98110

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.

See FERRY | 2

WEST HILLS AUTOPLEX

BIG GAME

SALES EVENT

FEB 11TH - 13TH, 2022

ENTER TO WIN

SAMSUNG TOIN 4N SMART TV

& SAMSUNG SOUND BAR

SEE BACK PAGE FOR GREAT DEALS

www.WestHillsAutoplex.com
Auto Center Way Exit • Hwy 3 • Bremerton, WA

[1] See dealership for details. All offers expire February 13, 2022.

Veterans

CONTINUED FROM 1

An employee then arrives and assists in getting her to the restroom. In pre-pandemic times when staffing levels were normal, she said the response time was five to 10 minutes. Now, she reports having to routinely wait for an hour before a staff member arrives.

"This is scary because you have accidents," she said. "We are all seniors, you know. We don't have control anymore."

Having fewer caregivers has also disrupted her usual Wednesday and Sunday bathing schedule, she said. Hofer reported being unable to shower for nine days in January. On consecutive shower days, she was told she would not be able to bathe because there was not enough staff available to assist her, forcing her

to delay her basic hygiene needs for a full week.

Meal service has also been impacted, forcing residents to wait longer to eat, she said. "This morning they were an hour late [with breakfast]. Yesterday, they were about 45 minutes late."

Hofer said it's difficult for the home's administration to attract more employees, even in the best of times.

"Nobody wants to take care of old people that are sick and cranky. It takes a dedicated sort of person to want to care for people," she said.

Despite the hardships created by the staff shortage, Hofer holds the regular employees at the veterans' home in high regard.

"The few regular staff we have left are doing their best. They want to serve and be pleasant under all the pressure. They do the best they can to take care of each one of us the way we want to be cared for. [Residents] have their idiosyncrasies

and [the staff] puts up with them."

The Army veteran does tend to view regular staff differently than many of the temporary hires brought in from employment agencies to cover shifts. "They don't want to work if they don't have to," she said of the "temps."

"Sometimes they get put on the schedule and don't show up," Hofer said. And it irks her that the temporary employees often get paid more than regular staff.

The complaints Hofer made about the reduced standard of care are regularly voiced at the resident council meetings, where residents gather to discuss issues and concerns. Hofer has been a member of the council on and off for years.

"We talk about staffing shortages at every council meeting," she said.

But the complaints aren't new to the veterans' home administration. Notes from the meetings are forwarded

to administrators, she explained. Hofer said when the administration is asked about problems associated with too few employees, the usual response is: "We are doing everything we can."

The main points Hofer raised with Kitsap News Group were shared with officials from the state Department of Veteran Affairs.

"Due to privacy laws, we are unable to share information or comment on individual residents," Jennifer Montgomery, a spokeswoman for the department, said in an email response to a reporter.

Montgomery did, however, provide information about a number of general issues that Hofer raised.

"The State Veteran Homes have struggled with staffing since the pandemic began in March of 2020," the department stated in a Feb. 2 letter sent to residents and family members. The

department has experienced an "unusually high number of vacant positions" and unplanned call-outs due to COVID-19 infections in staff or family, the correspondence stated.

To combat the impacts of fewer employees and ensure the best possible care, the Retsil facility has reduced the number of residents from a full capacity of 240 to 190 residents, Montgomery said.

"If we were at full capacity of 240 residents, we would have 70 vacant positions, 54 of those are in the NAC [certified nursing assistant], LPN [licensed practical nurse] and RN [registered nurse] job classes," the spokeswoman said.

Faced with staffing shortfalls, the veteran's home is taking action to ensure patient care is maintained, she noted. "If we experience less than ideal direct care staffing, we provide additional support staff,"

Montgomery said.

The facility is taking steps to increase staffing levels by changing employee shifts and staffing patterns, and closing units, she added.

Meanwhile, the veterans' affairs department is "aggressively recruiting" for direct care staff, Montgomery said.

To attract job applicants, certified nursing assistant candidates are being offered incentive pay. Steps are being taken to recruit more registered nursing assistants.

Regarding complaints about reduced bathing schedules, Montgomery said: "We have shared with residents ... that under the current staffing shortage, there may be a decrease in the care provided." For example, bathing may take place only weekly, but personal hygiene needs may be met using other methods such as bed baths, she added.

Best Tire Value PROMISE

WITH EVERY PASSENGER & LIGHT TRUCK TIRE PURCHASE

- ✔ Peace of Mind Tire Protection
- ✔ Lifetime Tire & Mileage Care

Doing the Right Thing Since 1952.

PORT ORCHARD

1891 SE Sedgwick Rd. (360) 876-8797

For a location near you, visit: www.LesSchwab.com.

Boerner's makes it easy for you to offload old firearms.

CONSIGN • SELL • TRADE

BREMERTON, WA • USA

THE LARGEST DEALER serving the Peninsula for more than 30 years

360-479-8056

Tuesday-Saturday 10AM - 6PM
4201 State Hwy 3 W #111, Bremerton
boernerfirearms.com

what's NEXT

KITSAP

NEWS GROUP

SOUND PUBLISHING INC.

KITSAP

Daily News

Healthy LIVING

This publication focuses on healthy lifestyle information such as exercise, nutrition, traditional and alternative medicine, plus advice from local people who know how to create a healthy lifestyle! We invite you to participate in this exciting multi-annual publication, now in its 14th year.

Ad Sales Deadline: Monday, Feb. 28

Publishes Countywide: Friday, March 25

Inside Bainbridge Island Review, North Kitsap Herald, Central Kitsap Reporter & Port Orchard Independent

For more information call your local representative:

Bainbridge: Brenda Jogens 360-329-4669
bjogens@soundpublishing.com

South & Central Kitsap: Priscilla Wakefield 360-394-8756
pwakefield@soundpublishing.com

North Kitsap: Denise Buchner 406-599-3869
dbuchner@soundpublishing.com

VALENTINE'S DAY IS FEB. 14 ARE YOU READY?

LOVE

FEEL THE LOVE

IN DOWNTOWN PORT ORCHARD

ROMANTIC DINNERS

GIFTS

FUN CHOCOLATE CRAWL

SPECIALS

PRESENTS

Bay Street Bistro ~ 834 Bay St.
Valentine specials Friday, Saturday and Sunday including entrees and chocolate or strawberry snowflake martini. Exclusive Valentines day prefixed 4 course dinner for \$125 per person. Entertainment Friday Jim Skewes, Saturday TBD, Monday TBD

The Candy Shoppe - 833 Bay St.
Chocolate covered favorites of all kinds: Truffles, Fudge, Peanut Clusters, Sea-foam, Taffy, Popcorn, Marshmallows, Malt-balls, Cherries, Espresso Beans, Caramels and Gummy Bears

Crows Curiosities - 122 Harrison St.
Line of Valentine cards

The Dock Bar & Eatery - 715 Bay St.
Prime Rib dinner, charcuterie tray, special cocktails and cheesecake available Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday!

Galentines Event - Friday, February 11th 6-9pm.
Gigi's Emporium PNW at 738 Bay St. and Twice around the Clock have paired up for an evening of fun, shopping and food at GiGi's.

Josephine's Mercantile ~ 701 Bay St.
Coloring Contest for kids and adults-Pick up coloring sheets and return by 13th when drawing will be held.

Sidney Art Gallery ~ 202 Sidney Avenue
One of a kind cards and gifts

Lover's Lane - Reservation required call 360-443-2975 or FB message or email
Beer and Chocolate pairing (\$30) Feb. 14th 2-8pm at Peninsula BevCo 110 Harrison, chocolates from The Candy Shoppe, photo booth by Irenes Photos!

PORT ORCHARD BAY STREET ASSOCIATION

www.pobsa.com