

NEWSPAPER WHIDBEY NEWS-TIMES

SATURDAY, JULY 24, 2021

COVERING NORTH & CENTRAL WHIDBEY ISLAND, WASHINGTON • \$1.00

County commissioners rescind COVID bonuses

By JESSIE STENSLAND
jstensland@whidbeynewsgroup.com

Island County commissioners rescinded a resolution that would have provided staff members with a total of \$1.5 million in lump-sum premium pay from federal relief funds.

But extra money will likely still be coming to county employees, just in a different form under a revised resolution.

Catherine Reid, county

Human Resources director, recommended revoking the resolution, saying that the county prosecutor advised that he would not be comfortable defending the action “based on one of the items in the resolution and the conversations that we had about premium pay.”

“The idea of rescinding this breaks my heart,” Commissioner Melanie Bacon said, asking Reid to expound on the issue.

Last week, the commissioners passed the resolution that would have awarded essential employees bonuses for their “incredible work” during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Those hired before Jan. 1, 2021 would have received a one-time payment of \$2,850 and those hired this year would have gotten \$1,425. County officials said all employees are considered essential, although elected officials,

temporary election workers and temporary judges would not have qualified.

The funds for the premium pay would have come from the \$16.5 million the county received through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which was meant to spur the economy and help individuals and communities recover from the effects of the pandemic. The act allows the funds to be used for premium pay to essential

workers.

The problem is that Washington state law and the state constitution doesn’t allow for retroactive premium pay or retroactive bonuses to public employees because of the prohibition on gifts of public funds. As the *Whidbey News-Times* pointed out in an earlier story, Municipal Research and Service Center questioned whether premium pay would

SEE PREMIUM PAY, A7

Suicides at bridge renew interest in nets

By EMILY GILBERT
emily.gilbert@whidbeynewsgroup.com

Two recent deaths at the Deception Pass Bridge this month have renewed calls for barriers like fencing or netting to prevent future tragedies.

Witnesses saw a 60-year-old man from Oak Harbor jump off the bridge the night of July 1. A couple of weeks later, witnesses saw a 21-year-old woman from Kent jump off the bridge on July 17. Both were pronounced dead at the scene, according to Island County Coroner Robert Bishop. A LifeFlight helicopter was called to Cornet Bay after the young woman jumped, but she passed away.

The bridge is a known spot for suicides, and officials respond to several each year. Bishop said the two recorded this month were the first ones his office has responded to this year. The coroner responded to one suicide at the bridge in February last year. There may have been other incidents that officials do not know about.

The Skagit County Coroner responds during incidents

SEE BRIDGE, A7



Photo by Katrina Andrew / Whidbey News Group

Alaina Pyne, 1, and Wyatt Wing, 2, play with crayons in the toddler class at Little Oaks Preschool. The facility has a waitlist but rarely calls anyone on it as they are usually full to capacity.

Cost, accessibility of child care raises concerns on Whidbey

By KARINA ANDREW
karina.andrew@whidbeynewsgroup.com

Freeland resident Andrea Downs started searching for child care when she was less than halfway through her pregnancy.

She researched multiple child care facilities, both on Whidbey Island and in Everett where she worked at the time. Location after location failed to suit her family’s needs.

Some didn’t operate during the hours she would need to accommodate her commute to work. Some were so far out of her way they would add over an hour to her daily commute. Some had waitlists over a year and a half long.

With limited options and time, Downs decided to hire a private nanny. Despite the greater expense, Downs said she con-

siders it a privilege that her family even had that option.

“If we were not in the situation that we were in, I don’t know what we would have done. I genuinely don’t,” she said. “I honestly think we probably would have had to end up moving.”

Downs’ experience isn’t unique among parents on Whidbey Island. Officials have identified high costs of child care and a lack of availability as significant public health and economic challenges for the workforce.

The Island County Child Care Partnership Task Force reported in its June 2021 Needs Assessment that in Island County, where the median household income is \$68,604, the typical annual cost of child care is \$13,000. That means on average, Island County residents are

spending at least 19 percent of their income on child care.

According to the Washington State Department of Commerce, child care costs are considered affordable when they do not exceed 7 percent of total household income.

Downs said reducing child care expenses to 7 percent would make a huge difference for her family and others.

“I don’t know any family where that wouldn’t be significant,” she said. “That’s savings, that’s college funds, that’s vacations.”

Washington does offer child care subsidies to low-income families through the Working Connections Child Care program, but the program is fraught with

SEE CHILD CARE, A2

Murderer of deputies continues appeals pro se

By JESSIE STENSLAND
jstensland@whidbeynewsgroup.com

A man who shot and killed two deputies in the Island County jail 34 years ago is still trying to appeal his murder convictions.

Representing himself, Darrin R. Hutchinson filed a petition for writ of habeas corpus and a motion for a report of proceed-

ings this year in Island County Superior Court.

Judge Carolyn Cliff denied both.

Since 1987, Hutchinson has filed at least three personal restraint petitions in various courts, a federal petition for habeas corpus and several other appeals and related motions.

Hutchinson was initially successful with the state Court

of Appeals, which vacated his convictions in 1997. The state Supreme Court, however, reversed the lower court’s decision and upheld his conviction.

On Nov. 14, 1987, Hutchinson — a South Whidbey resident known to law enforcement — shot and killed two Island County deputies, William Heffernan and John Saxerud,

in the Breathalyzer room at the county jail in Coupeville following his arrest on a driving violation. Hutchinson had concealed a .32-caliber pistol.

After the shooting, Hutchinson took a key from Saxerud’s pocket, stole a patrol car and later drove it into a ravine. He was arrested a short

SEE MURDERER, A7



Vol 129, No. 60

Subscribe and get your newspaper in the mail twice a week. Call 360-675-6611, x. 65004

Those with 'a kilt problem' are welcome

By KIRA ERICKSON

kerickson@whidbeynewsgroup.com

They're beer-loving and share an appreciation for traditional Scottish garb, but they're not always bearded.

More than four dozen lads and lasses from South Whidbey can call themselves part of the Rampant Kilt Society, a Facebook group that describes itself as "a pub social group with a kilt problem."

Members of the group enjoy the same hobby — dressing up in kilts, whether they be the traditional plaid of clan families or the neutral tones of a utility kilt.

"There are no hard, fast rules, it's really just have fun and have a common thread. The thread is the kilt," said Bexar O'Riley, the group's founder.

O'Riley, who has Irish heritage and "Viking blood," started the group a few months ago as an excuse for people to "dust off" their kilts and "scare the neighbors," he joked.

"Coming out of COVID, I was just thinking about the fact that we don't have a renaissance fest, we lost our highland games, so therefore the only time people really wear a kilt is on St. Patrick's Day or a wedding — unless they're die-hard kilters," he said.

Heritage and culture may be the foremost reasons why someone may don a kilt in the traditional pleated plaid — or khaki, in the case of a utility kilt — but O'Riley explained that there is no requirement for wearers to have Scottish ancestry in order to enjoy the garment.



From left to right, Cindi Crowder Rausch, Aimee Shand and Bexar O'Riley partake in a beer, while wearing kilts, at Ogres Brewing in Clinton.

The Rampant Kilt Society is open to people of all genders. As of press time, 15 of its 51 members are women.

"We have no problem with ladies wearing the men's style kilts or the ladies' cut of the modern kilt," O'Riley said. "It's all about getting people into kilts."

Cindi Crowder Rausch, a recent transplant from Texas, was excited to join the group when she moved to Whidbey.

"I sent him a message and said, 'Are girls allowed?'" she said with a laugh, referring to

O'Riley.

At the most recent kilt meet-up, Crowder Rausch sported a black hiking kilt in a women's cut.

"Typically, women's kilts are shorter," she explained. "This one, you get a breeze. But if you look, it's got a lot of the same features as the men's."

She is a fan of the garb, although she admitted to detesting skirts.

Aimee Shand, another member present at the meet-up, agreed.

"I don't wear skirts much," Shand said.

Utility, or hiking, kilts are a popular choice among many members of the Rampant Kilt Society. This choice of kilt can be more practical because it has pockets and is made for daily use. Seattle retailer Utilikilts manufactures many different styles that members are fans of.

O'Riley said the group purposely avoids having "kilt lawyers" telling other members what to do or wear.

"We don't want somebody

telling you how you have to wear your kilt," he said. "You can ask and we'll be glad to share that information as far as traditional dos and don'ts."

And there are definitely some dos and don'ts, including rules about going without underwear.

"Typically if you go regimental — that's the Scottish word for it — the only thing you really wear under your kilt is your shoes and socks," O'Riley said. "If you're doing that, that's not something you typically go to the kindergarten with or to grandma's house."

He added, "Probably the majority of people go regimental, but with utility kilts and sports kilts and all that, that's not always the thing. It's really a preference thing. If you're hiking in the woods, there's a lot of people that don't want ticks and stuff in the wrong places."

Crowder Rausch agreed. "Whatever you're comfortable with, I think is the thing," she said.

The Rampant Kilt Society convenes twice a month at different breweries around South Whidbey. Currently members meet on the first Wednesday and the third Sunday of the month.

The social group spans generations, with members in their 20s and others in their 70s, and everything in between.

O'Riley said he has seen a huge kilt movement in the Pacific Northwest that's spread across the country.

"I can see this actually going nationwide," he said of the Rampant Kilt Society. "I don't see why it couldn't."

CHILD CARE

CONTINUED FROM A1

pitfalls. For example, if household income increases by a relatively low amount which pushes it over the Working Connections limit, the family will lose the subsidy and their child care expenses will increase at an astronomical rate compared to the increase in income, according to Theresa Sanders, director of Island County Assessment and Healthy Communities.

Sanders said some military families on Whidbey Island who might otherwise qualify for the subsidy have been denied because they receive housing assistance which raises their income in the eyes of the state program.

"We have a pretty low percentage of our population, even our population that's eligible, that actually uses the subsidy, so to me that means there's either a lack of education, or it's really cumbersome to apply for it," she said.

Issues in the affordability of child care aren't unique to Island County,

according to Sanders. She said child care is expensive all over the country, and there are multiple systemic factors contributing to its high cost.

For example, unlike K-12 education, most child care is not backed by a governmental support system.

"We kind of start at kindergarten, even though we have a ton of public health data to support the importance of that investment (in early childhood education and child care) in terms of long-term community health," Sanders said.

Affordability isn't the only issue plaguing Island County child care. Accessibility is also a serious problem. The Needs Assessment indicated that Island County licensed child care availability only meets the needs of 550, or around 11 percent, of the county's 4,849 children under age 6 who have parents in the workforce.

This figure isn't indicative of how expensive

child care is, but rather represents a lack of available space.

Clinton resident Ansel Santosa, who recently started taking his 2-year-old daughter to the Children's Center in Langley for two to three days a week, said he was on their waitlist for more than a year.

Elizabeth Falls, owner and director of Little Oaks Preschool in Oak Harbor, said the facility almost never calls anyone from their waitlist because they stay consistently full; when spots do open up, they usually bump up children from younger classes.

Many military families experience the same challenges. Sanders said she's heard from representatives at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island.

"They are very clear that they have a child care issue," she said. "Their waitlist and need is vastly more than the number of slots that they have at their child care development centers."

Downs, whose husband is in the Navy, said that the first place she looked into while pregnant was



Little Oaks Preschool teacher Ashley Kulka reads to the toddler class.

base care, but the center was a year and six months out from placement, by which point she planned to have finished maternity leave and returned to the workforce.

When Island residents can't make traditional child care facilities work for them, they often rely upon friends and family members for help. Sanders said that on South Whidbey especially, where childcare facilities are few but retirees are plentiful, many parents rely upon their children's grandparents for care.

While "family, friend

and neighbor" care, as Sanders terms it, is an important part of the child care system, there are certain concerns associated with this type of care. It can strain relationships by overburdening family members, Sanders said, and non-professional care does not guarantee children are engaging in developmentally appropriate activities.

Janet Harris is a South End grandmother who often watches her two youngest grandchildren. Sometimes the kids attend the Children's Center in Langley for daycare and after school care, but the center's hours don't always meet the family's needs.

Harris's daughter, a single parent, was recently injured at her painting and construction job and often has to attend last-minute meetings with Labor and Industries in-

surance representatives or doctor appointments at odd hours. When these appointments come up, she relies upon Harris to care for her children, which Harris does for free.

"The cost is my sanity and my physical being," she joked. "I'm too old for this. I keep telling my daughter, 'I can't do this.'"

Problems in the child care system are a gender equity issue, Sanders said. The American employment system is founded on the idea that every worker has a spouse at home to manage the household and care for the children, an assumption that the workforce has yet to shake off.

"Child care has traditionally been work that women did, which isn't often prioritized in our culture," Sanders said.

In its 2021 special report, the Island County Child Care Partnership Task Force recommended several policies to help mitigate the cost and inaccessibility of child care. Recommendations included using money from the American Rescue Plan Act to fund new child care facilities and subsidize costs for families, creating an Island County Child Care Provider network to facilitate training and giving child care providers living wages and benefits to mirror K-12 instructors.

INSURANCE FOR TODAY AND BEYOND.

Leavitt Group NW. Trusted and Recommended.
Insurance coverage for auto, home, business and life.

Locally owned. Locally involved. **Let's Talk.**



Sue Blouin, CIC, ACSR
Client Advisor/Agent

Leavitt Group

Leavitt Group Northwest | Insurance | 800-726-8771 Direct: 425 783-3892
31650 State Route 20, Suite 1 • Oak Harbor, WA 98277 www.leavitt.com/northwest

Commercial

Employee Benefits

Personal

Life

Start your morning the
Whidbey Way

Enjoy a Complimentary Whidbey News-Times
with your Whidbey Coffee!

PICK UP YOUR COFFEE AND
PAPER AT WHIDBEY COFFEE

Oak Harbor | Pioneer Way
Oak Harbor | Highway 20



WHIDBEY NEWS-TIMES

PO BOX 1200 | 107 S MAIN ST, STE E101 | COUPEVILLE, WA 98239
360-675-6611 | WHIDBEYNEWSTIMES.COM