

## THE NEWPORT MINER

Serving Pend Oreille County, WA

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We welcome letters to the editor. Letters should be typed and submitted to The Miner and Gem State Miner office no later than 5 p.m. Friday for publication the following Wednesday. No letter will be published unless it is signed by at least one individual, even if the letter represents the view of a group. The letter must include a telephone number and address for confirmation of authenticity. Letters should be no longer than 300 words. The Miner reserves the right to edit to conform to our publication style, policy and libel laws. Political letters will not be published the last issue prior an election. Letters will be printed as space allows.

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Verizon slams door  
on local retailBY SOPHIA ALDOUS  
OF THE MINER

NEWPORT – Regional residents and businesses may find themselves in a bind after Verizon Communications Inc., commonly known as Verizon, uprooted their retail operations from Exbabylon IT Solutions in Newport at the beginning of the year. In a nutshell, this means people in the area no longer have a local storefront to purchase phones or get help with their wireless devices.

“Right now we have one hand tied behind our back,” says Exbabylon owner Alex Stanton. “We draw a big customer base and this absolutely affects them as well as us.”

Exbabylon was a sub agent that sold Verizon products and services through Verizon’s contract with master agent Celluphone. Verizon has discontinued its contract with Celluphone, so the stores that sold Verizon through them no longer have the ability to do so.

“Basically, we got thrown out with the bathwater,” Stanton says.

According to Stanton and Exbabylon Verizon Lead Rori Matthai, Verizon Network Real Estate Department made the decision to discontinue their contract with Cel-



MINER PHOTO/SOPHIA ALDOUS

**Exbabylon Verizon Lead Rori Matthai helps a customer at the company’s Newport site. Verizon Communications has discontinued its retail site at the store, which Exbabylon owners and employees hope to change.**

luphone based on 2020 U.S. Census information showing Newport as having a small population and being a subdivision of Spokane.

“They (Verizon) consider us on the outskirts of Spokane,” Matthai says. “Data off of a computer isn’t showing them the bigger picture. They just look at Newport and

think that it’s too small to need a retail site.”

Exbabylon’s customer base stretches from North Pend Oreille County, down through Newport and into West Bonner County, as well as Stevens County and Kootenai County. According to Matthai, over the past two years the store has exceeded 100 activations

per month for devices dependent on Verizon. Exbabylon also assists organizations like the Pend Oreille and Stevens County Library Districts, Youth Emergency Services and local school districts with Verizon jet-packs, which are mobile hot spots that can connect around 15 devices to the internet. Matthai says

there is a projected loss of \$1 million in gross sales annually from Verizon discontinuing their retail site in Newport.

“We could go over to AT&amp;T, but we don’t want to because Verizon serves more people in our area and there are Verizon cell towers here,” Matthai

SEE EXBABYLON, 7A

## GUILTY: Only one of four defendants left to resolve

FROM PAGE 1

after them on foot. He later saw Merritt stomp on something in the back of the UTV. He saw Merritt dragging Fox out of the UTV and leading him to a hole dug in the ground and put Fox on his knees.

“Oh god, they’re actually going to do it,” he remembers Fox saying.

Raddatz-Freeman told Merritt to leave. Merritt got back in the UTV and left and Raddatz-Freeman followed, leaving Hillestad standing there with Fox, according to Raddatz-Freeman’s testimony.

After going back to the shop and telling Merritt and Belding to leave, Raddatz-Freeman said he smoked another cigarette, then went back down to the tree line where he had left Hillestad. He said he saw Hillestad in the skid steer, and asked him why. This was after midnight and into the early hours of Sept. 15. Hillestad told him he was putting in a road. Raddatz-Freeman said he then heard Fox’s legs kicking the bucket of the skid steer, which was holding him to the ground.

“It’s a sound I won’t forget,” he said. Fox was on his stomach with the bucket on his back, he said. Hillestad was looking at him “with eyes as big as dinner plates,” Raddatz-Freeman said.

Raddatz-Freeman didn’t try to stop Hillestad, he said. He returned to the farmhouse, which is separate from the shop and office. Raddatz-Freeman lived there with Amanda Pierson and their three children, working as caretakers. Hillestad was also employed at “The Ranch,” as 22 Yergens Road was known to the people who lived there.

Raddatz-Freeman went to Hillestad’s “tiny home,” another building on the Ranch, where he heard Hillestad talking with Ashley Shelgren, he said.

Hillestad asked him if he could help him move Fox’s car. Hillestad came back with the car on a trailer covered with a tarp and they drove to Montana, where they disposed of the car, Raddatz-Freeman said. On the way back, they bought another car in Sandpoint.

A few days later Belding, Merritt, Hillestad and Raddatz-Freeman met in the shop again. Raddatz-Freeman said Hillestad told the group a common story and said they needed to stick with it.

According to Raddatz-Freeman, Hillestad said he had put Fox in the hole and was going to cover it when Fox jumped out and ran. Hillestad chased him with the skid steer and when Fox tripped and fell he put him in the skid steer. Clemmons asked if Raddatz-Freeman knew if Fox was dead at this point. Raddatz-Freeman said he didn’t know. Clem-

mons asked why Fox was killed. Raddatz-Freeman said he didn’t know.

## What the picture showed

In the addendum to the statement of probable cause, Raddatz-Freeman said Hillestad and Merritt were yelling at Fox over a photo Fox was thought to have sent to the mother of Hillestad’s child. The photo appeared to show Hillestad smoking an illegal substance, according to the statement of probable cause. Hillestad was denied visitation over the Fourth of July and the mother relocated the child and Hillestad was unable to have contact with the child. According to the addendum, Merritt and Hillestad blamed Fox.

Defense attorney Dennis Morgan called attention to the difference between what Raddatz-Freeman told law enforcement when he was questioned. Raddatz-Freeman agreed that he misled law enforcement when he was questioned in November 2020.

Morgan asked Raddatz-Freeman if he thought the skid steer was used to kill Fox. Raddatz-Freeman said yes.

With the jury out of the courtroom, Morgan said that one of the charges, unauthorized moving of a body, should be dismissed because it didn’t have all the elements of a crime. Prosecutor Dolly Hunt agreed and it was dismissed.

Morgan also tried to argue there was not a second or third degree assault that is needed to support a murder in the second-degree charge, since there was no weapon and Morgan said Fox didn’t suffer substantial bodily harm as a result of the assault. He maintained that if Merritt kneed Fox in the face, it was fourth degree assault.

Hunt countered that Raddatz-Freeman’s testimony was that he saw Merritt kneed Fox and later stomp on him. She said that was substantial bodily harm.

Radzinski ruled that the injury to Fox’s head clearly qualified as second degree assault. He said Raddatz-Freeman testified that he saw blood on Fox’s face after Merritt kneed him. He denied the motion to dismiss.

Before closing arguments, Fox’s mother, Pepper Fox, had tried to talk with prosecutors in their office. When told of the incident and after the jury had been dismissed, Radzinski said he didn’t think he could exclude her from the courtroom. He allowed her in and told her that there can’t be disruptions and there would be a time when she could address the court.

## Closing arguments

In closing arguments, Hunt said Merritt lured Fox out the Yergens Road property

Sept. 14, 2020.

“But for Mr. Merritt’s acts of drawing him out to the property, Mr. Fox wouldn’t be there,” Hunt said. She said the jury should find him guilty of all the charges.

Morgan said in his closing argument that Hillestad killed Fox. The question was who was with him, Raddatz-Freeman or Merritt, Morgan said.

The jury should take into account the size of the men. Merritt at the time of the killing was 5 feet 6 inches tall and weighed about 125 pounds. Hillestad was 6 feet, 5 inches and weighed 200 pounds and Raddatz-Freeman was 6 feet, 3 inches and weighed about 200 pounds.

“He could have stood up (to Hillestad) if he wanted,” Morgan said. “They’re the same size.”

Morgan said Merritt was under duress that night. After Hillestad kicked Fox in the face, he told Merritt if he didn’t go along, he would be next, Morgan said. Merritt was afraid, he said. Duress isn’t a defense for the murder and manslaughter charges.

Merritt’s blood was found on the upstairs bathroom tub. Morgan said that was the only physical evidence concerning Merritt.

Merritt didn’t lure Fox to the Yergens Road property, Morgan said. Fox went there voluntarily. He wanted to bring his music and party, Morgan said.

Morgan said there was enough reasonable doubt for an acquittal. The jury had to decide if Raddatz-Freeman was credible.

In her final remarks, Hunt said if Merritt hadn’t lured Fox out to Yergens Road, Fox would still be alive. She said Merritt didn’t fear Hillestad. After Fox’s death they were still friends, she said.

The case went to the jury just before 2 p.m. and they returned with a verdict about 6 p.m.

Merritt will be sentenced in 45 days. He faces up to life in prison.

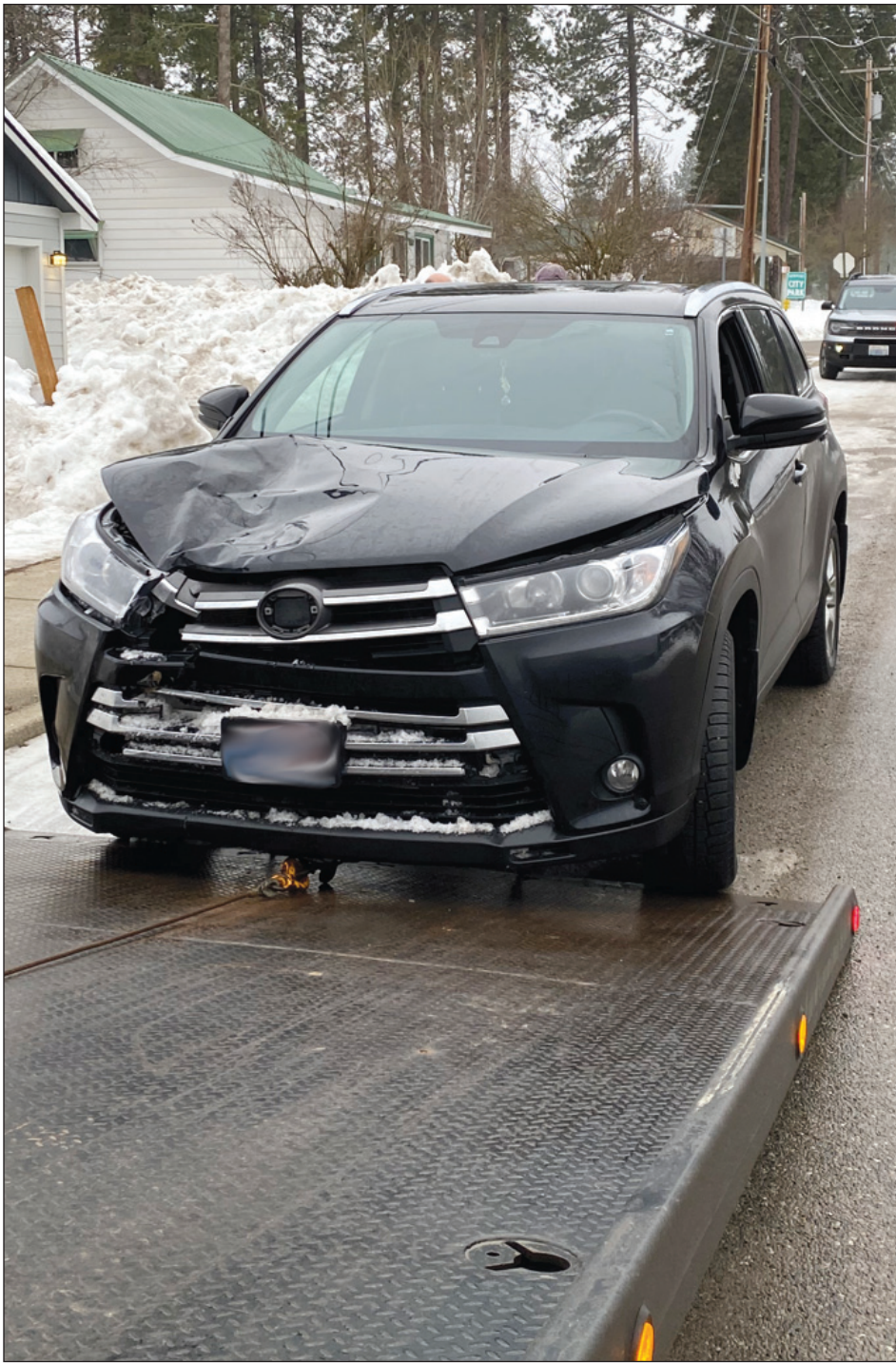
## Only Hillestad left

Merritt was the third case resolved in the Fox murder, leaving only Hillestad.

Belding pleaded guilty to rendering criminal assistance and failure to notify the coroner and was sentenced to 12 months in jail in late December. Although subpoenaed to testify, he was reportedly in California after being released. He had served 14 months at the time of sentencing.

Raddatz-Freeman pleaded guilty and a jury found Merritt guilty of the most serious charges.

# HIT AND RUN:



MINER IMAGE/MICHELLE NEDVED

Washington State Patrol investigated this Toyota, discovered by Newport Police Tuesday morning, along First Street near Calispel Avenue. It matched the description of the vehicle seen on surveillance video, according to Scott Davis of the Washington State Patrol, and had damage consistent with a collision.

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According to news reports, an as of yet unidentified man in a stolen truck struck two girls, age 12, killing one and injuring the other.

"This case has no relation to the other," WSP Sergeant Greg Riddell told The Miner about the hit and run in Newport.

As of The Miner's press time, the age of the female and identification was not

known.

"We are waiting for information gathered by the medical examiners to assist with identification," Riddell said.

Newport Police located the possible vehicle Tuesday morning in Newport on First Street near Calispel Avenue. Detectives are processing the vehicle for evidence.

State Patrol Detective Ryan Spangler is seeking any information and/or

witnesses of the collision or information on the running vehicle and driver. Video evidence indicates the running vehicle was likely a dark late model (possibly 2022) Toyota Highlander with right front damage to the hood and/or bumper. Anyone with information is requested to contact Detective Spangler at 509-227-6644 or Ryan.Spangler@wsp.wa.gov.

# Ybarra makes her budget pitch, discusses pandemic learning loss

**KEVIN RICHERT & BLAKE JONES**  
IDAHO EDUCATION NEWS

Idaho's schools will be trying to recover from pandemic-related learning loss for years, state superintendent Sherri Ybarra said Monday, and the early data is mixed.

"The impacts of the pandemic were less severe than we thought they might be, but we did see some declines in some of our statewide indicators of student achievement," Ybarra told the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee, as she presented her 2022-23 budget request.

As the Legislature began the second week of its 2022 session, JFAC turned its attention to Ybarra's Monday morning presentation by looking at the biggest budget of them all. K-12 receives half of the state's general fund — collections from sales, income and corporate taxes.

Before delving into the dollars — and her plan to spend more than \$2.2 billion of state tax money on K-12 — Ybarra recapped the state of education, nearly two years into the pandemic.

Remote learning was a challenge for parents and kids, especially in

the early grades. Employees — the ones who have stayed in schools — remain "overwhelmed," Ybarra said. Students are still reeling from long-term school closures dating back to the spring of 2020.

"And we should never do that again," said Ybarra, noting that most Idaho schools are now open, despite staff shortages triggered by a record-setting surge in coronavirus cases.

The test scores quantify the challenges facing students and teachers.

**TO READ THIS STORY IN ITS ENTIRETY, VISIT WWW.PENDOREILLERIVERVALLEY.COM.**

# COVID: Positivity rate nearing 50%

**FROM PAGE 1**

virus that causes COVID-19.

"In our own area, the positivity rate is approaching 50 percent," Schanz said. In other areas of eastern Washington, it is 68%. For the Tri County area of Ferry, Stevens and Pend Oreille Counties, that means that nearly half the people taking COVID tests test positive for the disease. "That is unprecedentedly high," Schanz said.

Dr. Sam Artzis, the district's health officer, said transferring patients to other facilities is still a big problem throughout the state.

"Transfers are non-existent throughout the state," Artzis said. That doesn't just mean transfers to hospitals that can perform a higher level of care, it also means transferring patients to nursing homes or other facilities because they can't care for themselves. If they can't be transferred, the hospital houses them.

Artzis says early indications are that the omicron variant doesn't make people as sick as previous variants, but with 500 people a day getting COVID in Washington, some people who catch it will need hospitalization. He said that 90% of the people with COVID who are hospitalized have not been vaccinated against the disease. Artzis said vaccines are effective in protecting against

severe disease.

"If you get the third dose, you have a 75 percent chance of preventing hospitalization," he said.

But even fully vaccinated people can catch COVID, sometimes more than once.

In Pend Oreille County, Jan. 14, 46 people were diagnosed with COVID and three people have had re-infections.

People who contract COVID after being vaccinated are called breakthrough cases.

The COVID vaccines all wane over time. Breakthrough infections account for 2.5% of COVID cases, Schanz said.

Schanz talked a little about the toll the pandemic was taking on his agency. He pointed out that NETCHD handles more things than COVID.

"It's been hard on them," he said of NETCHD staff.

Pend Oreille County has now had 28 deaths since the pandemic began.

Schanz said that models show that the omicron peak for new cases is expected to take place in the last few days in January. It will be about two weeks from then to understand its effect on hospitals. He said eastern Washington typically is seven to 10 days behind western Washington in COVID case trends.

"We know we have hard days ahead," he said.

## HOT BOX

Special deadline Tuesdays noon.

**TECH FOR SENIORS**

Thursdays, 10:00- 11:30. Phil Spiegel instructs. 900 West 4th, Newport. www.createarts.org (52)

**SNOW REMOVAL**

personnel needed for Town of Cusick. Contact Clerk@townofcusick.com (509) 671-9008 or publicworks@townofcusick.com. (52)

**SNOW TIRE CLEARANCE**

on all new and used snow tires in stock. Honest Ed's Tires 9972 Deer Valley Road, Newport. (509) 991-3820, Monday-Friday 8:00-5:00, Saturday 9:00-6:00. (51HB-3p)

**FREE INITIAL CONSULTATION**

at ELTC Law Group to support you and your family. Unexpected illness and death can happen and new tax changes that will affect everyone's estate have been proposed. Make sure you are prepared and please call our office for your Estate Planning, Asset Protection, After Death Transfers, Long Term Care/ Medicaid and General Business needs (509) 447-3242. (28HB-tf)

**HARRY - 60 YEARS**

on this married journey and we have gotten to walk it together every step of the way. How awesome is life when we are together? I am so glad to know what we are doing and to have a husband and friend like you. Love Marjie. (52p)

**WSU**

Pend Oreille County Extension Office has opening for Instruction and Classroom Support Technician 2 (SNAP- Ed Educator). Full-time, benefit-eligible, grant position. This position is part of WSU's annual contract for SNAP-Ed funded by the USDA. Must successfully pass a WSU background check, have reliable transportation, current automobile liability insurance, and a valid driver's license. Have, or be able to obtain within 30 days of hire, a valid Washington State Food Handler's Permit. For job details/to apply, visit www.wsujobs.com. EEO/AA/ADA. (52)

**CHECK OUT SPORTS**

You may have missed a story or picture of someone you know.

# EXBABYLON: Trying to raise awareness of situation

**FROM PAGE 2A**

adds.

The Miner reached out to Verizon Communications Manager Heidi Flato for comment. Flato oversees

the west area consumer media relations which covers 16 states including Washington and Idaho.

"We have two Verizon corporate stores that are in Sandpoint, ID, about

29 miles from Newport, WA," Flato responded in an email. "Please note that our customers also have access to customer care and our online store through our website. We will continue to monitor and evaluate our retail distribution needs in the area."

However, Verizon customers in the area who have already driven an hour from Ione to Newport or from Priest Lake now have extra mileage to tack on their drive if they want in-person assistance with their mobile device.

"People come in or call us about their cell phones or tablets all the time," Matthai says. "We get billing questions, we get tech questions, we get people coming from Ione, Sagle, Post Falls, Colville — it's that white glove service they come for."

"Personally, I don't want my 80-year-old clients having to drive all the way to Spokane and stand in line for an hour."

In a rural area where many people rely on their cell phones for communication and internet can be spotty, having local customer service is not a trivial thing.

"Who at a corporate store is going to help someone for 45 minutes

setting up FaceTime so they can talk to their grandchildren?" Stanton says. "That's some of the things our employees do."

Both Matthai and Stanton say there is another master contractor who has shown interest in picking up the contract with Verizon to provide retail services at Exbabylon, but Verizon has shown no interest in that option, at least not for six months because of bidding processes. In the meantime, Stanton is trying to redistribute Exbabylon employees who specialized in Verizon sales and tech support into different areas of the company to try and avoid layoffs.

He and Matthai are trying to raise awareness of the issue so a solution can be reached, hopefully before the end of the month. That takes a lot of community support, Stanton says.

"The regional Verizon office has been great and very supportive of us, but they can't make the decision," Stanton says. "We can be a noisy cricket, but unless customers speak up as well they (Verizon) won't hear us."

For more information and how to become involved, go to www.facebook.com/exbabylon.

## Where to Join

<p><b>PRIEST RIVER AMERICAN LEGION #147</b> For God and Country VETS HELPING VETS Community Breakfast A.Y.C.E. \$6.00 1st Saturday 8:00a.m. - 10:30a.m. Meeting follows at 11:00a.m.</p>	<p><b>SOROPTIMIST OF NEWPORT</b> Meetings second and fourth Tuesday at noon PineRidge Community Church 1428 W. First Ave., Newport Contact Micki Weisbarth 509-671-2552 www.facebook.com/siofnewport/</p>
<p><b>OLDTOWN AMERICAN LEGION POST #155</b> VETS SUPPORTING VETS in the ID/WA area Meeting 2nd Saturday at 10:30 am Oldtown Rotary Park 509-671-1057</p>	<p><b>MILITARY SUPPORT GROUP</b> ALL Branches Welcome Meetings every 3rd Thursday of the month 6 - 8 pm 759 4th St., Priest River 208-610-4152</p>

## NEWPORT HIGHLANDS

Newly developed rural view homesites close in to schools, medical and shopping. This 21 acre private & secluded land parcel is located just 3 minutes from Newport. Mostly level terrain w/ a view homesite overlooking the Selkirks & rolling hills beyond. Newly built roadway. Wildlife abounds. Bring your horses, 4 wheelers & snowmobiles. The forest land has been thinned. Seller terms OAC w/ 50% cash down & balance at 6% apr & 10 year term. Electricity is to the property.



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