

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Charlie Bermant, with local news and commentary for Tuesday, August 18, 2020.

Jefferson County is re-evaluating its survey program meant to gather data on local mask usage after a survey team member failed to adequately identify himself, causing a panicked reaction by a downtown merchant.

The incident occurred at Howell's Sandwich Shop in downtown Port Townsend on Saturday. Owner Mike Howell noticed a customer who was taking notes. According to Howell, the man would not identify himself when asked. When Howell asked whether the man was with the health department he answered "kind of, sort of." Howell asked to see any credentials, the man did not have them and he left the store.

Howell chased him across the street and took his picture which he posted on Facebook offering a \$300 reward for his identity. The post caught the county's attention, and Howell received a call from District 1 Commissioner Kate Dean, who identified the man as a county employee and promised to be more transparent in the future. This satisfied Howell, who complimented the county for its ability to put together a response in a short period of time.

The county posted two responses on its official Facebook page, the first pointing out that the man wore his mask inside the store and took it off once he had cleared the crowds. The post included an apology, confirming that the man was a part-time employee of the Jefferson County Department of Emergency Management collecting statistics on the proportion of Jefferson County residents and visitors who properly wear masks and maintain social distancing. This data was used to develop the recent mask policies issued by Jefferson County Health Officer Dr. Thomas Locke.

In a contrast to Howell's account, Department of Emergency Management Director Willie Bence said the man did identify himself as a county employee, he just didn't go into much more detail. Bence said the team members have been nervous about anti-masking sentiment and the staff member, unsure of where the engagement might head, made a quick decision it was in his best interest to disengage at that time.

To explain why a struggling business would offer a \$300 reward for the man's identity, Howell said there have been horror stories told by downtown merchants about people who visit a business and then make false claims about noncompliance. His purpose was to identify people who were ruining businesses for no reason. And since the county outed itself, the reward money will stay with the business.

Howell said he gets frequent government visits. Once he sees their ID "we let them do anything that they want," he told us. But both Howell and Bence agree that better communication between the government and the merchants is important and will head off any future apprehension on the part of the merchant or skittishness from the surveyor.

This team of five people – four volunteers and one staff member – did not adequately identify themselves on at least a few occasions. This caused unrest among the merchants. Both Howell and Quimper Sound owner James Shultz told KPTZ that someone in the store taking notes unnerved them, as they did not know whether this person was going to report them for noncompliance and subsequently endanger their business.

Howell and Shultz both feel that the government should change its adversarial relationship and work on ways to positively address the economic downturn. Howell said he is always hearing about what he can and cannot do, and merchants are made to feel they are the source of what's happening. He said the government needs to ask businesses what they need, especially in preparation for what promises to be a rough winter. Shultz said that

people in there service industry need to learn new safety protocols while having to enforce guidelines while dealing with hostile people. “Just once, “ he told us,” I wish that someone from the government would tell the merchants that they are doing a good job.”

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon Monday through Saturday and at 5pm Monday through Thursday. You can contact us through news@kptz.org.

This is Charlie Bermant. Thank you for listening.