

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Charlie Bermant, with local news and commentary for Tuesday, November 24, 2020.

The COVID-19 surge continues in Jefferson County. As of this morning we have 148 confirmed cases after eight new cases were added yesterday. That translates to 50 new cases over the past two weeks. Currently there are 76 pending test results, and the positive ratio has risen to 1.19 percent.

County Health Officer Dr. Tom Locke this morning told the Commissioners that the risk of virus transmission keeps increasing in Jefferson County and he is recommending an extreme remedy – that people cancel their travel plans for Thanksgiving and adopt a quarantine policy. If you travel out-of-state or to out-of-county hot spots, you need to quarantine for two weeks.

This is not new information. Locke also reiterated social distancing and masking protocols, which we can all recite by heart.

COVID-19 has also impacted the operation of the Jefferson County Court system. Superior Court Judge Keith Harper last week ordered the suspension of all in-person criminal and civil jury trials that were to begin prior to January 25, 2021. As for speedy trials, all time for trial criminal rules are suspended, and the times between the order through January 22, 2021 will be excluded for calculating speedy trial. All non-jury trials and fact-finding hearings will continue, with parties and attorneys choosing to appear in person or virtually. Felony plea changes and sentencing will still occur in person.

In District Court, court participants may be eligible to appear virtually for criminal cases. All traffic and civil hearings will be on the Zoom platform. Links for court and the phone number for dialing in can be found on the county's court webpage.

Jefferson Healthcare has established new restriction with regard to friend or family member visits to hospital patients, prohibiting all such visits unless special circumstances exist.

The restrictions are as follows: Patients with altered mental status, developmental delay, or display disruptive behavior, patients who require a support person to assist in complex medical decision-making for serious illness, and patients with disabilities who require a designated support person. Minor patients may be accompanied by a caregiver at all times, but children under 16 who are not patients are not allowed to visit any department.

The new policy began yesterday.

Local Pastor Micah Knox, who presents himself as a chaplain for Jefferson Healthcare on his Facebook page, is urging people to violate the rules for Thanksgiving gathering. In a post, he tells people to live in the freedom they have and not accept oppression, refusing to be manipulated, intimidated or dominated any longer. He implores people to leave masks off so others can see their smile.

According to Jefferson Healthcare, Knox is not a hospital chaplain, and the hospital does not endorse or condone his comments. Responding to KPTZ, Jefferson Healthcare issued a statement. “We strongly urge our community to mask and not gather with groups outside their household during the holidays. This is very important as we see community numbers rise.”

KPTZ was not able to reach Knox for a comment. Actually, we didn’t even try. His Church United in Port Hadlock has no listed phone, and under the circumstances we weren’t going to go knock on his door. Besides, talking to him would probably make us very angry, and we want to reduce our stress levels.

The Jefferson County Historical Society will close until March 2021, as directed by Washington Governor Jay Inslee’s latest mandate. The exhibit scheduled for the winter by artist Peggy Smith Venturi will open in April.

Our congressman Derek Kilmer usually measures his words, but his weekly message had a bit more bite than usual. He said that he is not just thinking about turkey this Thanksgiving; rather he is focused the lame duck session and the people who need Congress to act during that time.

To this end, he’s working to get a comprehensive COVID-19 relief bill passed by Congress – to crush this virus, to provide assistance to folks who are unemployed or experiencing housing insecurity, and to help small business. The House of Representatives has passed two bills for this purpose, but the Senate needs to act in order to avert economic disaster.

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.