

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Carmen Jaramillo with local news for September 7, 2021.

Today is the first day of school for many kids in Jefferson County. Children are returning to in-person schooling amid a dramatic increase in COVID-19 cases locally and one confirmed case of the virus at Port Townsend High School. Port Townsend School District notified staff and parents Sunday that a case of COVID-19 in someone who had been at the school was identified over the weekend. All people who are known to have been in close contact with this case will be notified directly according to the district. How many people were affected, or if any other possible cases are being investigated was not disclosed.

If you have not been contacted by the school you are not at risk of exposure according to the statement published online. Anyone who could have possibly been exposed is being offered a rapid antigen test at the school. Any future cases will be reported to staff and parents in the same way. Port Townsend School District is encouraging parents and interested members of the public to attend a webinar session on the district's health and safety protocols Wednesday September 8 at 5pm.

Last week Washington State Ferries issued a warning to travelers that staffing issues could lead to long wait times over the holiday weekend. The predicted widespread cancellations never materialized with almost every ferry making its sailings. A rumored sickout did not take place, with many workers stepping up to help out instead of stay home spokesperson Ian Sterling told the Seattle Times. This was one of the smoothest weekends in weeks he said, as the Washington State Ferry system continues to be marred by staffing issues. At least 130 sailings have been canceled since February, with many routes, including the Port Townsend route, already running less. The staffing issues are multilayered, with COVID-19 cases and quarantines partially to blame as well as a discontent among workers and a shortage of qualified mariners. A record 91 Washington State Ferry employees called out sick from work on August 12, putting incredible strain on those who continued to staff the ferries. Going into the long weekend maritime unions and ferry management pleaded with workers to show up. Extra scrutiny may have made some workers think twice before calling out.

Jefferson County's new proof of vaccination requirement for indoor dining went into effect Saturday. Almost everyone wishing to dine indoors at local bars or restaurants must be prepared to show proof of vaccination at the door. Only those under the age of 12, who cannot be vaccinated, are exempt. The order has been met with criticism and praise as COVID-19 cases continue to rise and several local deaths were reported over the weekend.

A group of roughly 40 to 60 people gathered in protest of the order Saturday outside of the Port Townsend Safeway. One participant described the protest as a peaceful success. They said the group included people from all walks of life and sides of the political spectrum who were gathered to protest what they see as government overreach into personal freedom and privacy. The protest, which was mainly organized on social media, went from about 9:30am to about 1pm.

One unaffiliated observer reported seeing a brief physical altercation that was quickly broken up by a nearby Port Townsend Police officer. A person in opposition to the protest reportedly pulled up protest signs that were in the ground and was met with animosity from the crowd. The situation was de-escalated in seconds by the nearby officer.

Some local restaurants have chosen to take a stand against the new health mandate, including my favorite Mexican restaurant, Pedro's Fiesta Jalisco in Port Hadlock. The restaurant posted last week on their Facebook page that they would not be enforcing the mandate because they believed it violated the medical privacy of their patrons and put unfair pressure on their business. This decision was not political or about the safety or efficacy of vaccines they said, but instead about protesting a mandate they believe puts the responsibility of policing the public onto already struggling small businesses.

Local restaurateur Mike Howell, owner of Howell's Sandwich Company in downtown Port Townsend, echoed the sentiment saying on social media he believed the county should help restaurants enforce the order instead of putting the responsibility on service workers. Silverwater Cafe announced they would be hiring what they call a greeter and what I call a bouncer to check people's vaccination cards at the door. Other restaurants say they do not have the funds to support such a position. Some locals are attempting to help out by volunteering to check cards. The health mandate, signed September 2, outlines the potential consequences of non-compliance. Businesses who do not enforce the mandate will be subject to permit suspension and referral to the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries. The mandate also outlines the authority to use local police to assist in enforcing the health order. As a restaurant worker myself, I have found most patrons are understanding about the new health order, but that is just a silver lining on the dark cloud of a struggling industry. Between supply chain issues, a labor shortage, rising costs and entitled tourists who demean wait staff, many of us are at a breaking point. So, please, give us a break. A twenty percent tip is the new normal.

And that's it for today's local news. 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. I'm Carmen Jaramillo. Thanks for listening.