

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Charlie Bermant, with news and commentary for Thursday, May 7, 2020.

It's been four full weeks since Jefferson County had its last reported any new cases of COVID-19. As of this morning, Jefferson County Public Health currently reports 28 confirmed COVID-19 cases.

While the number of cases and the infection percentage stays consistent, testing continues. Of the 942 tested to date, 903 – or 97% – tested negative, while 3% tested positive for the presence of the virus. Eleven people are now awaiting test results. Of the 28 people testing positive all but two have recovered from the virus.

These low numbers, along with no reported new cases for two weeks or more, has designated Jefferson County as one of ten statewide counties who can apply for early implantation of Phase-2 opening. Of these counties, Jefferson County has the largest and oldest population, and is the only one adjacent to a metropolitan area.

It is up to county officials to determine next steps. Phase-2 relaxations are due for statewide implementation on June 1, but Jefferson's low numbers allow it to submit a variance request to open certain public activities before then. This is a topic of a joint meeting between the commissioners, the Port Townsend City Council Public Health, and Jefferson Healthcare. Commissioner Kate Dean characterized the meeting as a work session to identify the questions we need to ask and the process for consideration.

The meeting takes place at 5pm today. While the public is not allowed to attend, you can watch it on the county's web site or listen live on KPTZ 91.9 or go to kptz.org. We will archive the broadcast for those who cannot attend the virtual meeting.

There is a sense of urgency and uncertainty to the meeting. Adding to this, our sources tell us that local officials got the news of Jefferson as one of the ten so called safer counties at the same time as the public, so they've had to scramble for a response.

According to Port Townsend Mayor Michelle Sandoval, any variance application must include information about sanitation, safe distancing, staff training, and other issues. It could take two weeks to assemble the application. As we've heard many times, a return to any sense of normal will be gradual – more like turning a dial than flipping a switch.

In-person public comments are not allowed, although people can weigh in with a public comment using jeffbocc@co.jefferson.wa.us.

This meeting represents a turning point, with its conclusions poised to shape our near future. One person who is especially engaged and has certainly sent in a public comment, is Rick Wiley, owner and operator of the Wheel In Motor Movie and the Uptown Theater. The Uptown will remain closed for the foreseeable future, but the drive in is a natural place where people can have a night out and still practice social distancing, according to Wiley.

The promised April opening was pushed back until tomorrow, which was again postponed to a now-undetermined time. Wiley told KPTZ that the opening date is contingent on what comes out of tonight's meeting.

According to Wiley, the Wheel In, along with the three other drive-in movies in the state, were promised an early exemption from the rules closing non essential businesses. This never materialized. Wiley thinks that if his closure extends into June it could permanently damage his business and he'd have to get a job at Safeway or – he jokes – the government. “These officials all collect their paychecks,” he said of the rulemakers. “They don’t know what it’s like to be shut down for three months.”

At reopening, the theater will implement responsible social distancing practices that will be outlined to each attendee. Concessions will operate within health department limits. “We are going to play this safely,” he told us. “I don’t want all of Seattle to come out here because they heard we have a drive in movie.”

Wiley hasn’t picked out a movie schedule, as it will depend on timing and film availability. There is one scheduled event: on June 12 the Port Townsend High School will hold its graduation ceremony following a parade of cars through Port Townsend. Go to the Port Townsend School District web site (https://highschool.ptschools.org/news/what_s_new/p_t_h_s_class_of_2020_schedule_information) for up-to-date information about the event.

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

This is Charlie Bermant with some of today’s news. Thank you for listening.