

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Charlie Bermant, with with local news and commentary for Thursday, April 8, 2021.

Jefferson County reported three new cases of COVID-19 yesterday, bringing the total to 354. This represents an increase of nine cases in one week. These cases are now in isolation, and 34 people are awaiting test results. Vaccines continue, and Jefferson County has maintained its statewide lead in the percentage of people receiving vaccines.

One week from today, April 15, the state expects vaccine availability for everyone older than 16. Tomorrow Jefferson Healthcare is slated to post information on how to get in the vaccination line. Go to jeffersonhealthcare.org and click on the green 'learn more' button at the top of the page.

We've learned a bit more about a protest action at the Port Townsend Food Co-op on Monday, where a woman was arrested after refusing to wear a mask while shopping. To recap, Rachelle Merle, a 42 year old "home schooler and farm wife" (her words), entered the store where she regularly shops without a mask, at which time she was asked to wear a mask or leave the store. She declined to do either, and the store called police who offered the same option. She again refused and was then arrested and charged with criminal trespass and will make an initial appearance in Jefferson County District Court on April 26.

The incident has exploded on Facebook, generating hundreds of comments on multiple sites. As you might imagine, they cover the landscape of Facebook discourse, from complaints about government overreach and accusations that the action was a "staged" event designed to get media attention for Merle and her opinions. Danell Mackey, who was one of four people accompanying Merle, told KPTZ that Merle planned the action and invited her friends to record to ensure her own safety. She hoped to document her expected harassment. Again, her word.

Mackey said Merle was calm and polite at all times while firmly expressing that she would not wear a mask and would not leave, because she was a Co-Op member owner. She had already filled up her shopping cart when police arrived. Mackey identified James Scarantino, editor of the Port Townsend *Free Press* local news site, as one of those videotaping Merle. While Scarantino had prior knowledge of the action, he was not its instigator, she said. Nonetheless, Scarantino posted the video on his Facebook page shortly after the incident, underscoring his opposition to masking and a belief in government overreach. In a subsequent post he indicated that he will participate in Merle's defense, which will partially rely on the idea that a member/owner cannot be ejected from their own property. This argument, along with Merle's assertion that mask mandates are akin to Nazis forcing Jews to wear armbands, was shredded on Facebook, likened to how a single stockholder is not entitled to violate company rules. Scarantino did not respond to comment requests. The Co-op also has not responded to KPTZ.

In a written statement, Merle said she "stand(s) with my face bare because I refuse to let our God-given and constitutionally protected rights be stolen; for I know that each stolen liberty forges the chains enslaving our children and grandchildren." There is way more to this story, including information that Merle advocated wearing a mask in the past due to her own allergies. Here on KPTZ we don't have the time or inclination to provide a blow-by-blow. If you really need to know, find one of the local Facebook pages hosting this discussion. But there is the notion that covering the story gives it oxygen and plays into the attention-seeking nature of a frivolous action. So our coverage will be restrained, in the future. And before you start making noise about news objectivity on KPTZ, be advised that this report is labeled as "news and commentary." Right at the beginning of every broadcast.

And as the mask debate continues, Jefferson County has added nine new cases of COVID-19 in the last week. Oh, I already reported that? Never mind.

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.