

You're listening to KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. This is Lily Haight with what's new in this week's Port Townsend Leader.

In a four-page document weighing the benefits and risks of loosening restrictions on businesses and social gatherings amid the coronavirus pandemic, Public Health Officer Tom Locke recommended the county reopen manufacturing, construction, domestic services and office-based businesses.

He also recommended reopening outdoor recreation involving fewer than five people — excluding overnight camping — and reopening nail and hair salons, barber shops and pet grooming services for local clients only. Locke recommended that overnight camping, restaurants with sit-down service, real estate offices and professional services related to tourism remain closed.

This recommendation from Locke is the first step in the county's plan to apply for a "variance" to the governor's "Stay Home, Stay Healthy" order.

The Board of Health will review the recommendation at a public meeting at 2:30 p.m. on May 14. The virtual meeting will be aired live on KPTZ 91.9 FM.

This will be followed by a joint meeting of the city council, board of county commissioners, PUD, port and Board of Health at 5 p.m. on May 19th.

A new case confirmed in Jefferson County over the weekend could put the county's plan to apply for Phase 2 of reopening on hold.

A woman over the age of 90 was confirmed to have the virus. She was released from Jefferson Healthcare on May 11.

She is the first patient to be hospitalized locally.

According to Locke, she was in stable condition and "doing fine."

Health officials began the case investigation and contact tracing this weekend, Locke said.

They were able to benefit from new testing tools available at Jefferson Healthcare, including two types of antibody testing that allows health officials to determine when someone was first exposed and infected with the illness.

With a new case confirmed last weekend, Jefferson County now has 29 cases of the coronavirus.

The United States now has more than 1.4 million cases of the coronavirus, with a death toll of more than 83,000.

In Washington state, there are now more than 17,000 confirmed cases and 962 deaths.

Because of the new case, the county might no longer fit the state's criteria for opening businesses early. Under the governor's order, only counties that have not experienced any new cases in three weeks can apply to loosen restrictions.

But according to Locke, there has been discussion at the state level as to whether this criteria is valid. Several counties, including Mason and Stevens, have applied to move to Phase 2 of reopening, even though they did not fit within the governor's criteria.

Kittitas County, which was one of the original 10 counties allowed to apply for a variance, has now seen an outbreak at a meatpacking plant where 35 people were confirmed to be infected.

According to Locke, it is unclear whether Jefferson County remains eligible for a Phase 2 variation and this eligibility will need to be determined by the Secretary of Health, John Wiesman.

More than 60 concerned parents, community members and past students attended a virtual Port Townsend School Board meeting on May 7th to show their support for OCEAN, the district's alternative education program, as it faces changes to staffing and a review of its effectiveness in the 2020-2021 school year.

Many individuals spoke in support of the program, logging on to a cluttered Zoom call and weathering technical glitches and hold-ups for their allotted two minutes in the meeting's public comment section.

Several parents credited OCEAN with saving their child's lives by being a supportive alternative to regular classroom learning.

Parents were told on April 26th that the district had eliminated one half-time teaching position from the program. The district also attempted to prohibit incoming high school students from enrolling in the program this coming fall.

In addition to feeling like the cuts cripple the program's ability to serve its students, parents said they felt as if they had been unfairly left out of the process with no chance to voice their concerns until after a decision had been made. Many allege the district had intentionally kept parents in the dark and said this was another example of a history of no support for the program.

The Recovery Cafe stands half-constructed on the corner of Kearney and Blaine streets in Port Townsend. With one wall partially built and stacks of lumber waiting to be installed, the cafe's doors are not yet open to the public. But the mission of the cafe—to provide services and community gathering to those in recovery from addiction, homelessness, mental health issues and other life challenges—began long before construction crews broke ground.

The Recovery Cafe's advisory committee has been working behind the scenes to create a program for when the door's open.

And in the midst of the coronavirus, they have already begun to reach out to those who need help with virtual "Recovery Circles."

Brian Richardson, director of the Recovery Cafe said he was surprised to find that for some people, video conferencing technology actually increased access to services because people do not have to arrange transportation or because they feel safer emotionally in the comfort of their own home.

The pandemic has required the advisory committee to rethink how the Cafe will open in the coming months. The committee is working on a multi-stage "opening" beginning with virtual services, followed by curbside meal service, then possibly outdoor Recovery Circles and meals, and indoor services when appropriate, Richardson said.

For these stories and more, check out this week's edition of the Leader on newsstands and online now. This is Leader news reporter Lily Haight, on KPTZ 91.9 FM.