

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Lily Haight with local news for August 25, 2021.

Jefferson County Public Health reported 6 new cases of COVID-19 yesterday for a total of 16 new cases so far this week. Right now, there are 37 cases in active isolation. Department of Emergency Management Director Willie Bence announced on Monday that the county is preparing to offer mass clinics for booster shots coming up in September. There will be two to four large mass clinics first for immunocompromised individuals, and then later in September, more clinics for health care workers, older residents, high risk populations, and then finally for all adults. The process for getting your booster shot will be similar to the prioritization process used for the initial shots – older individuals will be prioritized, as will essential workers. Adults are recommended to get a booster shot 8 months after your second vaccine dose. To learn more about how to get vaccinated, go to the public health website (<https://jeffersoncountypublichealth.org/1429/COVID-19>).

The city council voted last Monday to extend their shutoff, late fee, and penalty suspensions for utility accounts through the end of the year. Back at the beginning of the pandemic, on March 23, 2020, the city manager and mayor signed a proclamation suspending shut-offs, late fees, and penalties for utility accounts through June 30, 2020. Since then there have been four extensions of this proclamation. Governor Inslee's final utility moratorium ends on September 30, but he is encouraging utility providers to work with past due customers to find financial assistance and offer extended payment plan options.

Finance manager Tony Hillman explained to city council members that an additional three months of utility payment forgiveness will give staff time to help customers navigate the various assistance programs and develop a process to provide extended repayment options beyond the pre-COVID repayment timeline of two months. According to city staff, there are 74 customers over 90 days past due for \$35,238 with a total amount due of \$67,303. The city does have a donation program fund for individuals who cannot afford to pay their utility fees because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The city has given out around \$1,100 to 13 or 14 customers in need. Currently there is about \$7,000 in that fund. To apply for funding, go to the city website and click "Pay My Utility Bill" which will lead you to a page with a link to the application (https://cityofpt.us/sites/default/files/fileattachments/finance/page/6561/covid-19_application_finance.pdf). That will also lead to a link to donate to that fund, if you are able. Hillman explained that many customers have received help from OlyCAP and St. Vincent de Paul, and if no other customers use the city's fund for help paying utilities, they may give the remaining balance to those organizations.

The city council also voted last Monday to appoint five citizens at large to be part of the city's new financial sustainability task force. Catharine Robinson, Earll Murman, John Nowak, Richard Jahnke, and Troy Surber were approved by a unanimous vote of the council. Robinson works as a lead therapist at Jumping Mouse Children's Services; Murmann is a retired MIT professor, involved with many local nonprofits, such as the United Good Neighbors, and the Jefferson County Community Foundation; Nowak works with Jefferson Healthcare and is co-director of the Community Health Improvement Plan; Jahnke is a longtime resident and currently a member of the city's planning commission; and Surber is the city's former police chief.

The task force will work with BERK consulting group, a consulting firm the city hired for two years for a total of \$34,000, to help develop a 2022 budget, complete a community engagement survey, compile benchmarking data, and create a long-term forecast model for the future of the city's finances. The task force member's terms will last until August 2022. This work comes at an unusual time, when the city faces financial challenges from

the COVID-19 pandemic, but also has just received relief funding from the federal government to deal with some of the financial strains of that, and to invest into local infrastructure. According to city manager John Mauro, the task force will face a significant time commitment, with regular monthly meetings for over 10 months. He also hopes to work with the Port Townsend School District to have a student serve as a non-voting member of the task force.

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 Lily Haight. Thanks for listening.