

Good afternoon. You're tuned in to 91.9 FM KPTZ on your FM dial here in Port Townsend Washington. I am Simon Jaynes, bringing you your local news for February 24, 2022.

The week has been uncharacteristically dry and cold in Port Townsend. Small snow flurries the past two mornings served as indication of the low overnight temperatures, but nothing has managed to stick around until today. This morning, people in the city of Port Townsend woke up with 1 to 2 inches of the powdery white stuff on the ground. The small accumulation was enough to provoke a bit of excitement and a snowball fight or two at my house but nothing in terms of school closures for the area. Conditions on roadways were slippery this morning, but as skies clear up in the afternoon, the snow is melting off. Afternoon highs today are going to remain on the chilly side, but slightly warmer into the low 40s. However, the lows this evening and tomorrow morning will still be on the cold side, generally in the upper 20s, so it is still an important time to make sure that the 4 Ps are taken care of: people, plants, pets, and pipes.

For the weekend: A wet weather system is predicted to arrive mid-day Saturday, bringing widespread rain in the lowlands and snow in the mountains. The Olympic Peninsula could see 1 to 2 inches of rain this weekend, possibly provoking flood responses from the most sensitive river basins. The best advice is to keep an eye on your weather apps if you have any travel or outdoor activity planned this weekend. February may very well have a few more surprises in store for us.

COVID-19 cases are continuing to trend downward according to Jefferson County health officials. The health department reported 15 new cases in the county yesterday, bringing our total since the beginning of the pandemic to 3005. There are currently 112 active cases in isolation, 4 people hospitalized, and there have been 26 deaths from COVID-19 since March of 2020. The county's vaccination rate is near 81% and the two-week case rate is half of what it was a month ago – now at 618 per 100,000.

In Olympia, the State Senate is considering a bill that would impact conditions in health care facilities across the state. House Bill 1868, known as the hospital staffing bill, passed the house on February 15 despite major pushback from the Washington Hospital Association and county hospital administrations statewide. The bill aims to solve a problem that everyone agrees needs addressing: state and nationwide staffing shortages for nurses and hospital staff. There is a strong difference of opinion, however, on what changes should be made from a lawmaking standpoint. The sponsors of Bill 1868 say their aim is to provide relief to nurses and other workers experiencing pandemic burnout. Meanwhile the Hospital Management side of things accuses the bill of simply imposing ratios that are unattainable that will simply result in unit closure and longer delays for patients. According to Amy Yaley, Director of Communications for Jefferson Healthcare, "If House Bill 1868 becomes law, hospitals including Forks Community Hospital, Harbor Regional Health, Jefferson Healthcare, Olympic Medical Center, and Summit Pacific Medical Center, will be forced to decrease or delay services if they are unable to hire enough nurses to meet the inflexible staffing ratio requirements."

Tim Pfarr, Communications Director for The Washington State Hospital Association, adds that "National staffing shortages would make compliance with HB 1868 impossible. An October 2021 survey of Washington's hospitals estimates an additional 6,100 nurses are needed to meet current hospital staffing needs – before ratios." He argues that, "The legislation would intensify competition for nurses and certified nursing assistants across the health care system, meaning staff shortages that already exist at other essential health care providers like nursing homes, surgical centers, and blood collection would worsen."

Meanwhile, the perspective of State Representative Marcus Riccelli (D-Spokane), one of the bill's sponsors is, "With all the pressures of the pandemic, hospitals should not be adding stress to nurses and healthcare workers by not adequately staffing our hospitals. Hospital executives have been able to find millions of dollars to pay themselves bonuses during this pandemic, and now it is time to ensure that healthcare workers and patients are protected from unmanageable patient loads." This is a policy difference playing out in Olympia right now that will undoubtedly have ramifications here on the peninsula for anyone seeking medical intervention in the coming months.

If you are curious to track this bill's progress in the senate or to find out how to let your voice be heard, you can visit the website of the state legislature and search for HB 1868 (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?billnumber=1868&year=2022>).

On Tuesday the music and Art's Festival THING NW announced its official dates for this summer and gave a preview of the lineup. Tickets go on sale tomorrow for the event that will take place at Fort Worden from August 26 to 28, 2022. You can find all the details at <https://thingnw.org/>.

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 Simon Jaynes. Thanks for listening and have a great day.