

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend. I'm Jim Burke, with your local news and commentary for Tuesday, December 26, 2023.

From the *PT Leader*: The unwrapping of the Port Townsend Post Office occurred a week and a half ago. The building's restoration began last March when the post office was wrapped in polyethylene film in order to restore the stone exterior to its original condition and to replace windows. The project is scheduled to finish at the end of January, according to Postmaster Denise Judd.

The Post Office is a federally-owned building and its restoration is a federal project. With this, a common assumption is a belief that it is a tax-funded project and therefore subject to disclosure requirements. This is not the case. In a statement, PR officer Kim Frum stated, "The United States Postal Service is an independent establishment of the executive branch of the government of the United States. As such, tax dollars are not used to keep the lights on, pay our employees, or move billions of pieces of mail. The Postal Service instead relies on the revenue it generates from the sale of stamps, products, and services to fund its operations. USPS self-funding, and not tax dollars, is paying for the Port Townsend Post Office project." The project includes, among other things, removing and replacing more than 100 windows to match current windows in appearance (a process that can require one week's labor for each window), cleaning and repairing the existing sandstone façade, removing and replacing gutters to match current gutters in appearance, and restoring the roof-mounted flagpoles. As a federally owned building, city-mandated permits were not required.

The post office was built in 1893, when Port Townsend was poised to be a key trading hub in the Pacific Northwest. It incorporates the Richardsonian Romanesque style popularized in the late 1800s and known for incorporating 11th and 12th-century characteristics of Spanish, Italian, and southern French architecture styles. The sandstone structure was the first federally constructed post office to be built in Washington state and was listed on the U.S. National Register of Historic Places in 1991 as one of the Quimper Peninsula's oldest and grandest buildings.

The Port Townsend Post Office has drawn repeated criticism for its lack of compliance to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The building is accessed through stone stairs on separate sides of the building. The building does not – and will not – include access ramps or an elevator. USPS spokesperson Frum declined to confirm or deny whether the project would be ADA-compliant. Confirmation of its lack of compliance was available from other sources, however. People in wheelchairs have the option to go around the back of the building and hit a buzzer, at which time a postal employee will attend to their needs. This is a paltry solution, according to the board chair of Disability Awareness Starts Here (DASH) Patricia Teal of Port Townsend, who has lobbied for disability access at the Post Office. These previously unsuccessful efforts began anew in 2021 when the restoration plans were first discussed. In an April 2023 letter to Teal, USPS representative Lisa Williams said there were no plans to install wheelchair ramps as part of the restoration. Williams said that those with disabilities have the option of using the bell. Otherwise, they have to travel nine miles to the ADA-accessible Port Hadlock Post Office, go online, or go to Chimacum.

Teal said she was "dismayed" by this response. She is one who has difficulty with technology and chooses to not pay her bills online. She also values the tactile aspect of regular mail. Teal said of the ramp installation. "They refused to do this. And it's not just about people with wheelchairs. Parents in strollers can't get in, and seniors can have difficulty using these stairs."

DASH's previous efforts led to the lowering of the bell by several feet, to the point where it can be reached from a wheelchair. This is a small victory, Teal said. If someone in a wheelchair can reach the bell, they will still have difficulty navigating the speed bumps on the driveway. In her letter, Williams cited cost as a reason to

not install ramps, as well as the post office's construction prior to ADA requirements. The building is recognized by the National Register of Historic Places, something the Post Office has used to resist modifying the building for ADA access. Teal said, "This designation doesn't mean that the building can't be upgraded. There are lots of creative ways they could do this that would be sensitive to the needs of a historical building." This is confirmed by the Washington State Architectural Historian, who said there are no rules that restrict the retrofit of historical buildings for ADA compatibility.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news Monday through Friday at noon and 5pm and at noon on Saturday. You can contact us at news@kptz.org. This is Jim Burke. Thanks for listening.