

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend. I'm Taylor Nations with your local news and commentary for Tuesday, February 27, 2024.

Recently KPTZ news reported about a Port Angeles woman who was charged with stealing a Clallam Transit diesel bus from Sequim Transit Center on December 27 and then driving it south on Highway 101 until it was stopped in Mason County. Both the woman and the bus were returned safely to Clallam County. The Clallam County Prosecuting Attorney's Office has charged the woman with stealing a Clallam Transit System bus.

Another story about Clallam Transit follows from *The Peninsula Daily News*: The Clallam Transit System saw a big jump in ridership last month, according to General Manager Jim Fetzer, but it's too early to tell if those numbers were a result of the new zero-fare pilot program that kicked in January 1. Fetzer said the numbers were getting back on track to 2019 ridership levels. The system recorded over 53 thousand (53,486) passenger trips on its fixed-route service in January 2024 compared with over 43 thousand (43,401) passenger trips in January 2023 – an increase of about 23%. Ridership on paratransit in January 2024 was about 26% higher compared with the same month last year, and ridership on the interlink microtransit service in Forks and Sequim was 125% higher.

The Strait Shot service that runs between the Gateway Transit Center in Port Angeles and the Bainbridge Island Ferry Terminal does not fall under the zero-fare policy, but experienced its best month ever in January with 1,180 riders compared with 865 the same month last year, a 36% increase.

There were some reservations among drivers when the zero-fare policy was implemented due to concerns about attracting people who wanted to ride the bus all day and increasing incidents of bad behavior, but that hasn't happened, said Rick Burton, the drivers' representative on the board. Support for the fare-free program and fare-free policy for riders 18 and younger came from a \$1.9 million Move Ahead Washington grant funded by the state's 2021 Climate Commitment Act.

An initiative that will likely appear on November's ballot would repeal the act. Fetzer said if it were to be repealed, Clallam Transit would lose that funding. Clallam Transit is considering adding an additional round trip for each of the two buses on the popular summer Hurricane Ridge Shuttle and cutting back its operation to June, July, and August rather than running through September, when ridership dropped significantly. Fetzer said he would be meeting with Olympic National Park Service staff and developing a proposal for the board to consider.

In other news from the meeting: Clallam Transit has struggled with recruiting and retaining drivers, but it has filled all of its open paratransit positions. It is still recruiting fixed-route drivers.

From Governor Inslee's office: Pacific Northwest salmon are fighting for survival. Their numbers are shrinking, and state, federal, and Tribal conservation efforts, while significant, have only managed to slow the decline. Last Friday, President Joe Biden signed a historic partnership agreement first announced in December to restore wild salmon populations, expand clean energy production, and reinforce the economic benefits of the Columbia River system. The agreement comes with a \$1 billion federal investment directly supporting salmon restoration and one to three gigawatts of new, Tribally-sponsored clean power generation. Yakama Nation chairman Gerald Lewis said, "The Columbia Basin is facing complex and related problems. Salmon are dying, our fishermen

have empty nets, and our families have empty tables. We need more clean energy, but we need to develop it in a way that is socially just. We can – and will – save our salmon and, working together, we can and will ensure that our communities will have the energy and resources they need for generations to come.”

In late 2022, Gov. Jay Inslee and Sen. Patty Murray commissioned a joint report yielding several key conclusions: Salmon populations are on track for extinction, the dams must one day be breached to save them and protect the federally-guaranteed right of Tribes to fish, and that the enormous economic benefits of the dams must be replaced before the rivers run free. The president’s signature on Thursday moved the process forward in a significant, responsible, and feasible fashion.

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