

Hello again and happy Juneteenth! This is Derek Firenze with your local news and commentary beamed in from the *Jefferson County Beacon* for Wednesday, June 19, 2024 in partnership with KPTZ 91.9FM in Port Townsend, Washington.

Attacks on the Tri-Area Food Bank continued last week with signs posted around the property last Thursday with statements against staff members saying “Stop the Tyrants,” alongside allegations earlier sent out in letters to local press.

On Wednesday, before the signs went up, I went to the Tri-Area Food Bank to see whether accusations of limited supplies and volunteer safety had truth to them. What I found was bountiful produce, volunteers cracking jokes while music played, and a line of clients in cars orderly proceeding through the pick-up. I watched as one volunteer struggled to find space for more products in a client’s car as box after box of produce and dry goods already filled the trunk.

I’d heard plenty was on hand from the food bank association’s executive director Patricia Hennessy earlier that week when she noted truckloads of food had arrived. Hennessy was hired in November of last year after a strategic planning session identified the need to hire an executive director for the first time in the organization’s history. Since her hiring, the food bank association president, vice president, and treasurer retired from the board that brought her on while change swept through the organization. The most recent resignation of John and Sue Laird, who previously managed the Tri-Area Food Bank, sparked the outburst of allegations.

In an eight-page letter from John Laird to the organization, he referred to his dismissal and other media outlets reported he was forced out. Hennessy, however, made clear that Laird was not fired but resigned from his position noting there was footage from Jefferson County Sheriff’s officers where Laird said, “I resigned yesterday.” In his letter to the board, Laird claimed the board president and treasurer had informed him that he needed to resign or would be removed from management, barred from the property, and taken to court. Laird said he did not have the resources for a court battle, so he resigned.

The incident involving the police was not the first issue with the Lairds. Hennessy said that during a board meeting in March of this year, discrepancies in bookkeeping became a concern. Suspended receipts between the Tri-Area and Quilcene food banks totaled around \$5,000, Hennessy said. The Lairds were asked to show documents for Tri-Area showing where the money was spent by April 1. Hennessy said she was concerned by the Lairds’ response when they told her they had used money for themselves which they would pay back. In his letter to the board, John Laird claimed his wife had kept the books up to date. He also wrote that he had never received any concerns about missing receipts, and was surprised to be asked for a \$500 receipt from last year, and wondered if that was the reason he had been asked to resign. While internal investigations continue alongside an IRS audit, that hasn’t stopped the organization from achieving fundraising goals.

Individual donor donations are ahead of where they were by this time last year, Hennessy said. She also noted that the Tri-Area found a new volunteer to step in as manager, and that the association was hiring additional staff members to build capacity as need continues to grow. 600 additional households began using the food banks in just the first quarter of this year alone, Hennessy said.

Thankfully, partnerships with the food bank are expanding. The Food Bank Growers are hoping to bring in close to 40,000 pounds of produce this growing season. Additionally, the food bank association is working with WSU and OlyCAP on a local food purchasing agreement to buy more produce from local producers. And, thanks to a grant secured by the Jefferson County Farmers Markets, seniors can receive additional benefits for locally grown produce.

There's no good transition for this next story which still breaks my heart to say. As many of you may already know, beloved community member Laura Martin passed away recently. Laura, 73, left us on Friday, June 7 after a night filled with song, stories, and dance where she smiled wide.

To prepare a tribute, the *Beacon* posted requests for remembrances on social media with hundreds of responses. One recollection found in *The Beacon's* tribute came from Recovery Cafe manager Brian Richardson, who said, quote "I heard someone when they learned that she died, saying 'Oh, Laura, she could really irritate me, but I loved her.' Sometimes the people that we find the most challenging teach us the lessons that we really need to know. I think Laura taught us how to be patient, how to be compassionate." More recollections can be found at <https://www.jeffcobeacon.com>.

Several celebrations for Laura are planned, including tributes at the Recovery Cafe on June 21 and 28, an open mic at the Port Townsend Farmers Market on June 29 and a Quaker Memorial Meeting for Worship will be held for Laura at 11am on Saturday, August 17, at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Port Townsend.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and 5 Monday through Friday and at noon on Saturday, partnering on Wednesday to bring you stories from jeffcobeacon.com. You can submit ideas to The Beacon through info@jeffcobeacon.com. This is Derek Firenze. Thanks for listening.