

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Charlie Bermant with news and commentary for Tuesday, December 24, 2024.

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A judge's ruling has provided a possible path forward for hospitality operations to continue in Fort Worden State Park in 2025, striking down his previous ruling to delay the implementation of a master lease. Jefferson County Superior Court Judge Brandon Mack issued the ruling yesterday, after a one-hour hearing on December 20.

The court appearance was the latest chapter in the story of the rise and fall of the Public Development Authority. After years of struggling and mismanagement, exacerbated by the years of COVID-19, a court-appointed receivership was recruited to redistribute funds, pay bills and implement a new lease. The Fort Worden PDA has been operating under an existing master lease from State Parks. With the insolvency of the PDA, the court-appointed receiver had until December 4 to accept or reject that lease. State Parks put together a lease proposal, which the receiver had until December 4 to accept or reject, but the receiver went to court the day before Thanksgiving and said there was no harm in extending that deadline 90 days, which the court did.

The problem was that the action was taken without the input of State Parks and the Fort Worden partners, who were vehemently opposed to granting an extension as it would jeopardize the summer season. State Parks, represented by the Washington State's Attorney General's office, requested its own hearing last week, asking the judge to vacate his previous actions because all of the parties were not represented. The judge granted that action, which represented a rejection of the proposed lease by the receiver. This action allows Fort Worden partners to negotiate directly with State Parks, putting the bank's action on a separate track and taking them out of the day-to-day operation.

The PDA began in 2010 as a resource management organization, amending its charter in 2012 to focus on Fort Worden. It developed a business management plan and began negotiating a master lease with the park. This lease was approved in 2012, with the PDA taking over day-to-day operations of the campus area on May 1, 2014. Mismanagement, alleged embezzlement, and failed projects, such as an unsuccessful glamping section, signaled trouble in paradise. The PDA was never able to fully recover from COVID-19, even after the installation of a new governing board and two successive new executive directors.

Partners such as Northwind Art and KPTZ continued to grow, with the radio station sharing a renovated Building 305 with new Centrum offices. These forward steps were offset by a lack of maintenance, which was the PDA's responsibility.

Maintenance is an issue, as many of the park's buildings are in disrepair. Centrum Executive Director Rob Birman said that receivers have not spent one cent on campus maintenance. They have refused to accept the maintenance requirements of the PDA and seem to have wanted to get a custom lease, without the maintenance obligation, which the partners find objectionable. Said Birman, "Anyone can operate a PDA profitably if they don't have to do the maintenance." – like last month, when the boiler system in the Commons failed, leaving the building without heat and causing a move to the considerably less hospitable Guard House to provide basic services. Birman told KPTZ that Centrum will await a signal from State Parks with regard to next steps. He favors moving forward immediately with State Parks which is akin to how it operated for 40 years prior to the appointment of the PDA.

After a stressful few months that has thrown the Fort Worden partners into jeopardy, Mack's ruling has given them hope. Said KPTZ General Manager Taylor Clarke, "This is a big change, it re-arranges the playing field

and I'm not sure that anyone yet understands all the ramifications, but it does push the receiver back and gives Parks the lead.” There is a lot more to this story, and we will keep you updated here on KPTZ News.

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KPTZ broadcasts local news at noon and 5pm Monday through Friday and at noon on Saturday. You can contact us through at [news@kptz.org](mailto:news@kptz.org). This is Charlie Bermant. Thank you for listening.