

This is KPTZ FM 91.9 in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Nhatt Nichols, bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Wednesday, January 8, 2025.

Port Townsend Food Co-op board chairman Owen Rowe resigned from his position on December 31, citing the repeated failure of Co-op management to address community equity concerns and a hostile work environment. Saying, "I felt like I was being put up as a shield, rather than trusted to actually talk to the community, actually listen to them."

Black Lives Matter of Jefferson County (BLMJC) called for a boycott of the co-op in August when the board fired member Cameron Jones following a heated discussion with the Co-op's General Manager, Kenna Eaton, in April over employee equity concerns. Rowe called a special board meeting in July, at which Jones was voted out. The handling of the issue led fellow board member Juri Jennings to resign in protest. When asked in October about Jones' firing and BLMJC's call for his resignation as board chair, Rowe made it clear that he was unwilling to step down.

Several months later, it's clear that he has had a major change of heart. Rowe's resignation letter includes an apology to former board members Jennings and Jones, and members of the current board for putting them in a difficult position. Rowe claims he realized that the Co-op's management was not invested in listening to the community's concerns; they simply wanted the issue to disappear. He ended his letter by calling for the resignations of general manager Eaton, board secretary emeritus Lisa Barclay, and vice-chair Diana Grunow.

Tonia Burkett of Usawa Consulting has been instrumental in facilitating community conversations and holding the Co-op accountable. She seems hopeful that Rowe's resignation is a step in the right direction, saying, "I know that [Rowe] had a reputation for being a really caring, warmhearted person, and that he had been taking workshops around equity. I think there's potential for him to change."

Jones also remains hopeful, acknowledging that Rowe was the reason he ran to be on the Co-op board to begin with, explaining that he met Rowe when he ran for city council in 2021. After Jones lost the city council election, Rowe encouraged him to join the board of the Co-op, framing it as a place where it's more possible to push for equity and radical ideas. With Burkett and Jones acknowledging that Rowe has the capacity to change and grow, they also expressed their disappointment over his decision to step aside and not continue to fight for equity issues with Co-op management.

In response to Rowe's resignation letter, the Co-op boycott campaign organizers have requested that he publicly apologize to Jones, Jennings, BLMJC, Usawa Consulting, and the broader community, essentially making his resignation letter public. They also ask that he call for leadership accountability, advocate for an independent investigation, and create a plan to continue working on this project and reduce harm. For his part, Rowe is ready to take a moment to reflect on the last six months, saying "I love the Co-op. I am not attached to being right, meaning, I am attached to having the fight stop, and also recognizing that for myself I need to be out of the center of the fight." At this time, no member of the Co-op's management has responded to a request for an interview, and the January board meeting has been canceled. Organizers of It's My Co-op Too ask that people follow their Facebook page for updates.

The documentary *Since I Been Down* reveals the truths of incarcerated youth in Washington State in the 1990s and their pursuit of redemption. In 2023, a surprising announcement was made after the documentary was shown at the Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship: the Black Prisoners Caucus had been banned from

meeting without a volunteer from outside present to facilitate. The need for volunteers rallied a group of people at the screening who then developed the Peninsulas Prisoners Solidarity (PPS).

Lily Haight works in the Public Defender's office and is preparing to undergo the training process to become a volunteer. Haight says her motivation behind the Peninsulas Prisoners Solidarity group is based in remembering that people in prison or jail, are community members too. They have needs and should be treated with dignity and respect. A showing of *Since I Been Down* will be on Saturday, January 18 at 7pm at the Rose Theater. There will be a panel after the movie with some of the people featured in it, and an opportunity to talk with current volunteers about how to participate. All ticket proceeds go to the Black Prisoners Caucus.

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