

This is KPTZ 91.9 FM on your dial in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Angela Michelle bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Wednesday, June 4, 2025.

Jefferson County PUD Board of Commissioners will review and possibly vote on a proposed 9% rate increase. The result of a yearlong cost-of-service analysis, the proposal will be reviewed – and possibly voted on – at the board's next regular meeting. The proposal comes after the completion of a detailed financial and operational study conducted by PUD staff in collaboration with the consulting firm FCS Group. The study found that a combination of gradual rate increases and low-interest borrowing will be necessary to fund long-anticipated repairs and upgrades to the county's aging electrical infrastructure.

In 2023, PUD General Manager Kevin Streett informed the commission that the electric grid could require over \$100 million in investments over the next ten years. A more immediate capital improvement plan calls for more than \$65 million in spending on substation repairs, equipment replacements, and grid upgrades between 2026 and 2030. Jameson Hahn, PUD's Digital Communications Specialist, said, "Our four-year work plan accounts for future growth and levels up our grid with the latest tech to better understand and keep a pulse on how our grade operates."

The PUD bought the system from Puget Sound Energy in 2013, and much of what was inherited was already at the end of its useful life. According to Streett, the age of the grid isn't the only factor prompting the proposed increase. Rising electricity demand during the coldest days of winter has begun to strain equipment that once had sufficient capacity. These peak-load events have led to outages and extended recovery times, particularly in areas served by older or more limited infrastructure, as the system is experiencing a slow but steady increase in demand. If approved, the 9% increase would take effect in the second half of 2025. For the average residential customer using 1,000 kilowatt-hours per month, the change would translate to an estimated \$12 increase in their monthly electric bill.

The utility's funding strategy also includes pursuing low-interest loans through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service, which provides financing options for rural electric infrastructure projects. These loans, along with phased rate adjustments, are intended to limit sudden impacts on ratepayers while addressing long-term needs. Streett said, "We never take rate discussions lightly. The study, and the rates being proposed, are what we consider an absolute necessity to address our aging grid, meet growth, and maintain and improve reliability."

Members of the community who wish to weigh in on the proposal can attend meetings in person or watch the June 3rd meeting online via the PUD's website. If adopted, this would be the first in a likely series of rate increases over the coming years, part of a multi-year plan to ensure that Jefferson County's electric system can continue to meet modern demands and withstand the stresses of weather, population growth, and aging infrastructure.

News by Scott France.

A new COVID-19 variant fueling a global rise in cases has been detected in Washington, but health officials aren't too concerned. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found the variant in a sample collected on May 15 at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, according to the state Department of Health. As of Thursday morning, that's been the only case confirmed in Washington, and it's unclear whether the May 15th case was in a state resident or a visitor.

The case was found through the CDC's Traveler-based Genomic Surveillance (<https://www.cdc.gov/traveler-genomic-surveillance/about/index.html>) that detects COVID through voluntary nasal swabs and wastewater samples at a number of American airports. Washington is one of a handful of states where a case has been reported.

As its prevalence has grown quickly around the world, the World Health Organization has designated the new variant, NB.1.8.1, as one "under monitoring" (https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/documents/epp/tracking-sars-cov-2/23052025_nb.1.8.1_ire.pdf). NB.1.8.1 is fueling a spike in infections and hospitalizations in China, for example. But the organization believes the variant doesn't lead to more severe illness than current versions of the virus.

Local health officials agree. Dr. Herbert Duber, regional medical officer with the state Department of Health said, "In general, I think that there's low concern. But I think with any new variants, we really do need to monitor them." Current vaccines are expected to remain effective against NB.1.8.1.

But the new variant comes as the Trump administration has shifted vaccination guidelines. U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. announced this week that the CDC would no longer recommend the COVID vaccine for healthy children and pregnant women (<https://washingtonstatestandard.com/2025/05/27/repub/rfk-jr-ends-covid-vaccine-recommendation-for-healthy-children-pregnant-people/>). The Trump administration has also limited eligibility for the vaccine, holding it should only be given to people over 65 or those with risk factors from other medical conditions. Last week, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration said it would require new testing to prove the shots are effective for younger people.

News by Jake Goldstein-Street, the Washington State *Standard* (<https://washingtonstatestandard.com/>).

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