

PT School Board approves new director districts



All the school districts in East Jefferson County, including Chimacum, had to take snow days, and Port Townsend has extended its school year a bit further into the summer as a result.

LEADER PHOTO BY KIRK BOXLEITNER

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With national debates raging over gerrymandering, representation and other voting rights questions, the Port Townsend School District re-drew the boundaries of board members' districts March 7, with barely a peep from the public.

The changes, creating larger director districts and at-large positions, are meant to foster a larger pool of potential board members for each seat, Superintendent John Polm says.

"Each citizen would be eligible to run for three positions instead of one," Polm explained when previously explaining the changes. "And the opportunity to run would come up every two years instead of every four years."

Finding people to fill school director positions has been a challenge, since the last three new directors were appointed to vacancies, then elected in uncontested elections.

During the March 7 school board meeting, Polm noted the redistricting plan had drawn neither any public comment during the previous school board meetings, nor any submissions of written comments.

School Board Vice Chair Jennifer James-Wilson expressed positive sentiments regarding the redistricting process, under which she will serve out the remainder of her 2017-21 term, but will shift from the previously defined District 2 to the newly created at-large District 4 position.

“I like the way this was all laid out,” James-Wilson said. “Everyone did a really nice job.”

Polm remarked that he was interested to learn the process of redistricting firsthand, and offered his thanks to Jefferson County officials for working with the school district to ensure the newly aligned districts satisfied Washington election law.

“It was the first time for them dealing with these issues as well,” Polm said, adding that, while the redistricting was approved by more than 80 percent of voters, “People were still a bit hung up on the previous districts.”

EXTRA SCHOOL DAYS

The Port Townsend School District had already built in two snow make-up days in its schedule on Feb. 15 and May 24.

But because of full-day closures Feb. 4, 11 and 12, plus its two-hour early-release day Feb. 8, Port Townsend schools were in danger of not meeting the state’s mandatory 180-day school year.

To make up the difference, the school board voted to change June 14 from an early-release day into a full day of school, while adding June 17 as a two-hour early-release day, and designating June 18 as another snow make-up day if needed.

Just as school officials filled the holes caused by one of the snowier Februaries on record, flurries on Wednesday and Thursday made them jumpy.

“When I saw a little bit of snow coming down earlier this week, I thought, ‘Oh, man,’” Polm said with a laugh.

School board member Laura Tucker, whose four-year term in the previous District 4 position expires this November, acknowledged that it’s “a bit tricky” for students to return to school for a final half-day after a weekend, but Polm ruled out covering those snow days with a waiver, since the district had already been granted a waiver for the late start of Salish Coast Elementary’s school year due to the statewide construction strike.

“We didn’t want to go down that road again,” Polm said.