

OpEd for the Port Townsend and Jefferson County Leader – October 2020

Our local restaurant community needs our help — urgently.

The pandemic has hit the hospitality industry, and restaurants in particular, very hard. Before COVID-19, restaurants and hotels throughout Washington employed about 300,000 people. Recent numbers from Employment Security Department show that over 100,000 of those hospitality employees are no longer working.

We have seen this with local favorites. They say that in decades of being in business, they've never seen anything this catastrophic, like the beloved local Ajax Café in Port Hadlock, which has been in business for 43 years. Kristan McCary, co-owner, says, "We've had to make major readjustments to stay in business. We opened our Boat Shack in late spring, which is on our outside deck, and cut way back on our indoor seating."

As they head toward fall and winter, they plan to continue serving outside, but have had to make additional purchases like outdoor heaters and new coverings for the deck to withstand anticipated wind and rain. "Our business is substantially under half of what it was a year ago. Our goal now is to hang in there through the winter and hope for a better situation in the spring."

Life for restaurant owners is about to get even harder: Restaurants have been able to safely serve guests throughout the pandemic and have relied heavily on outdoor seating. But the arrival of fall means rain, wind, cold, and earlier darkness are on the way, and much of that outside seating will be lost. We hope that some restaurants, like the Ajax Café, might be able to continue to serve outside, but will customers still come if the weather is bad? Without more indoor seating available, many restaurants will close. How do we help them and get more indoor seating? The county needs to be able to move to Phase 3, and to do that we need to keep our cases low.

So here's our request: Please, wear a mask, practice physical distancing, and wash your hands. Ask your friends to do the same. You've done well, Jefferson County, don't ease up now. Our cases are dropping and staying low because we're working together to take care of each other. If we continue to be diligent, we have a chance of being able to help our restaurants stay open, serve more guests inside, and stay viable. And please continue to support our restaurants, either by dining on-site or take-out. Our community needs that.

Olympic Peninsula Tourism Commission
Jefferson County Tourism Coordinating Council
Olympic Culinary Loop
The Chamber of Jefferson County