



Retired Public Employees Council Chapter 11 – Walla Walla Area

Barry Jenkins, President

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Dear Fellow Chapter 11 Members,

I hope that the change of the season will put a spring in your step. The good news is that thanks to many of us getting our COVID vaccines already, things are slowly getting closer to allowing us to meet again in the not-too-distant future. If you still need a COVID shot, check available appointments at <https://www.covidwwc.com>.

Meanwhile, your local officers managed to meet in a January via conference call, and the Audit Committee just met to review our financial records to complete our Audit Report for last year.

We are looking into having an outdoor meeting when the weather improves, and it becomes safer. Nominations and elections for our 2021-2022 officers will be on the agenda as well as discussion of the chapter's 2021 budget, and we will review possible locations for our upcoming meetings. A picnic social is also anticipated when we can reunite safely. If you have comments or suggestions about any of these ideas, please contact me at 509-529-6372 or barryjenkins53@yahoo.com.

In Solidarity,

Barry Jenkins, RPEC Chapter 11 President

DRS COLA Rates for 2021 Established

Cost-of-Living Adjustments (COLAs) for DRS-administered retirement systems and plans that receive a COLA have been established for 2021. LEOFF Plan 1 COLAs will take effect April 1 and will be reflected in end-of-April benefit payments. For all other plans that are eligible for a COLA, the COLA will take effect July 1 and will be reflected in end-of-July benefit payments. To view the 2021 COLA percentages by retirement date and plan, go to: <https://www.drs.wa.gov/retirees/information/cola/>

Post COVID Vaccine Guidance

The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) is adopting the guidance released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regarding post-vaccine behavior. If someone has been fully vaccinated, they can:

- Gather indoors with fully vaccinated people in private residences without wearing a mask and,
- Gather indoors with unvaccinated people from one other household in private

residences (for example, visiting with relatives who all live together) without masks, unless any of those people or anyone they live with has an increased risk for severe illness from COVID-19.

The CDC is quite clear that vaccinated people should continue to wear masks when out in public, avoid crowds and take other precautions when gathering with unvaccinated people who are at high risk of serious illness from COVID-19.

If a vaccinated person has been around someone with COVID-19, they do not need to stay away from others or get tested unless they have symptoms. However, if a vaccinated person lives in a group setting and is around someone who has COVID-19, they should still stay away from others for 14 days and get tested, even if without symptoms.

Regardless of vaccination status, people should still take steps to protect themselves and others while in public settings. This includes wearing a mask, staying at least 6 feet from others, and avoiding crowds and poorly ventilated spaces.

So, We've Been Thrice Phased - Can We Have an In-Person Chapter Meeting Now?

Unfortunately, not so fast. Washington State's Four Phase Approach to Reopening advises that at Phase 3, high risk populations should continue to "Stay home, stay healthy". High risk populations are currently defined as:

"Persons over 65 years of age or older, people of all ages with underlying medical conditions (particularly not well controlled), including person with moderate lung disease or chronic to severe asthma, people who have serious heart conditions, people who are immunocompromised, people with severe obesity, people with severe diabetes, people with chronic kidney disease undergoing dialysis, people with liver disease, and people who live in a nursing home or long-term care facility."

For the time being, RPEC staff advises that we should continue to meet virtually for the time being. The good news is that things are starting to move in the right direction more rapidly now, and that is very encouraging indeed.

IRS Extends Federal Tax Filing Deadline to May 17

On St. Patrick's Day, the IRS announced it is delaying the federal tax filing deadline, giving taxpayers more time to prepare their filings amid the slew of pandemic-related tax changes. The Treasury Department and the IRS said "the federal income tax filing due date for individuals for the 2020 tax year will be automatically extended from April 15, 2021, to May 17, 2021.

"Individual taxpayers can also postpone federal income tax payments for the 2020 tax year to May 17, 2021, without penalties and interest, regardless of the amount owed," the IRS said.

These changes do not apply to state tax returns and payments, and the relief does not apply to estimated tax payments that are still due on April 15, 2021.

Congressmen Richard Neal (D-MA) and Bill Pascrell (D-NJ) said in a joint statement, "Under titanic stress and strain, American taxpayers and tax preparers must have more time to file tax returns. And the IRS itself started the filing season late, continues to be behind schedule, and now must implement changes from the American Rescue Plan."

Tax-Aide Kicks Off Free Local Tax Preparation

The AARP Foundation Tax-Aide Program began taking appointments for its free tax preparation and e-filing services on February 12th. Due to the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic, the traditional face-to-face preparation with a Tax-Aide counselor is being replaced with a Contact-Free approach.

AARP Foundation Tax-Aide Program is an all-volunteer organization whose tax counselors are trained and IRS-certified every year to ensure they understand the latest changes to the U.S. Tax Code. All tax preparation interaction with taxpayers will take place via telephone and video conferencing. **The service is free and will be offered through May 17.**

Appointments for taxpayers living in Washington can be requested by calling 888-OUR-AARP (888-687-2277) and leaving a voicemail. A volunteer will call back to set up an appointment. Assistance may also be requested through the AARP Foundation Tax-Aide website at www.aarpfoundation.org/taxaide.

RPEC Olympia Headquarters Office Installs New & Improved Phone System

The Council Office has finally installed our new phone system. You will find things a little different now. While the office remains closed due to COVID, we have implemented a menu system to help direct your calls directly to the person/department you wish to speak with. You may also, upon hearing the message begin when you call, simply enter the person's extension that you are trying to reach.

The new extensions are as follows:

Emmett Mills, Administrative Assistant	100
James Cockburn, Executive Director	101
Catherine Walborn, Accountant	102
Tara Jo Heinecke, Membership Coordinator	103
Derek VanSpoor, Information Technology & Communications Specialist	104
SHIBA Ombudsman	105

Our new system is a digital, voice over internet system which also allows us to utilize an application on our mobile phones that mimic our extension at the office. So, when you are calling a staff member, they will either immediately pickup, or if busy, you will get

their voicemail. The staff person then receives notification via their phone and email that they have the voicemail.

We hope this system will provide you with a quicker response from the Council Office and allow us to better serve you while we operate remotely.

RPEC Executive Director's Report

Legislative Bill Update: The state Senate has taken the first step towards addressing the state's upside-down tax code. **SB 5096**, which would tax high-end capital gains for the top 2% of Washingtonians passed out of the Senate by a 25-24 vote on March 6th. The House is expected to quickly approve the bill and send it to the Governor.

This bill takes a forward leap to address the issues with our current tax code and raises over 550 million dollars in revenue for important programs. Legislators are beginning to understand that funding the state by taxing the average retiree 7 times more than the wealthiest and large corporations is not sustainable.

The emergency clause was removed. However, opponents of the legislation will have time to perfect their arguments and legal briefs with the expected court action taking a detour this fall for a referendum vote.

As retirees, RPEC members have an important role in the discussion around the tax code and it is important that your Legislators continue to hear from you. A full list of the bills we are tracking, and their status can be found on the RPEC website at: www.rpecwa.org.

We encourage our members to join our weekly Legislative Update Zoom Meeting every Friday at 1:00 PM. To join us via computer or tablet visit: www.zoom.us/join and enter the Meeting ID: **828 6634 6713, then enter the Passcode: **205507**. You can also dial in by telephone at **1-253-215-8782** and enter the same Meeting ID and Passcode.**

Federal Update: The U.S. Senate approved their version of American Rescue Act in early March. This legislation includes \$1,400 in direct checks for Americans making under \$75,000, a \$300 per week supplemental unemployment bonus, money for vaccine distribution, and funding to aid schools and state and local governments which will help ease the pressure on their budgets.

The legislation was subsequently approved by Congress and was signed into law by President Biden on March 11th. The sweeping domestic policy injects hundreds of billions into the ailing economy at this most critical time in our nation. Distribution of this third round of stimulus checks to taxpayers began on Saturday, March 13th.

Sincerely,

James Cockburn, Executive Director
Retired Public Employees Council of WA