

## Tensions flare between Fire District and Town

By Sandy Stokes

The town of La Conner and Fire District 13 each own half of the La Conner Fire Station, located on Chilberg Road, and have shared equipment and response areas for years.

Now, with proposed changes to their operating agreement, La Conner Fire Department and Fire District 13 would end up like a divorced couple who co-own a house and continue to live in it together but have separate refrigerators and furniture.

The Fire District, which surrounds the town and operates fire stations on Snee-Oosh Road and March's Point, wants to move its own firefighters into the La Conner Fire Station and terminate the portions of the operating agreement that allows La Conner to use its truck and respond to calls in the District 13 territory east of Swinomish Channel.

Town officials fear that the proposed changes could have a bad impact on town residents' fire insurance rates and could increase the town's costs.

Fire District 13 Chief Roy Horn said the fire district can respond to the calls in the La Conner Flats and Pleasant Ridge areas for less money than it pays the town fire department to handle the calls. Under the present operating agreement, the town charges the district \$215.25 for each call it handles in District 13 territory.

Also, the La Conner Fire Department uses the Fire District 13 truck — which Horn says gets about four miles to the gallon — whenever it responds to a call in the district's territory.

The district has proposed an "automatic response" agreement for certain high-level calls, like structure fires. That means that each agency would automatically roll response in the other agency's territory for big calls. And neither agency would charge the other for the "automatic response" calls.

For La Conner, the money it presently collects for responding to district calls is not the main issue, and while an "automatic response" agreement could benefit the town, it does not solve the principal concern, which is response capacity, according to Town Administrator John Doyle.

The town's main worry is that under the proposed changes, the town would be banned from using the district's fire truck — which counts as a backup unit to insurance underwriters, who require the town to show it is covered if its own truck in is for repairs or tied up on another call.

Not having a truck to count as backup could cause homeowners' fire insurance rates to go up. And being forced to purchase another fire truck in order to have that backup could cost the town hundreds of thousands of dollars, Doyle said.

Another concern is that many of the town's volunteer firefighters actually live in the fire district's territory east of town. Those volunteers may not want to respond only to calls inside the town limits, which could

cause the town to lose volunteer firefighters, Doyle said.

In late March, Fire District 13 sent the town a letter stating its intention to modify the operating agreement. Last month town and Fire District 13 officials met.

Doyle said the town has proposed a merger of Fire District 13 and the La Conner Fire Department into a single fire authority to cover both service areas.

In a letter to the town dated April 27 and signed by Fire District 13 Commissioner Allen Cooper, the district said it is not interested in forming a fire authority right now, although, "for the most part, the forming of a fire authority has proven to be successful in other parts of our state."

Presently, Fire District 13 is a tax-funded agency governed by three elected commissioners and an appointed Fire Chief, Roy Horn. The town's fire department operates under the elected five-member Town Council with an appointed Fire Chief, Dan Taylor.

A fire authority would be a separate entity, with an elected board representing both the town and the area covered by the Fire District, which extends from the western edge of the Swinomish Reservation and east to Best Road.

A fire authority would replace the fire district and the town fire department — two agencies that have been in management disputes several times over the years.



**DEMONSTRATION MARCH** — Hundreds of energetic students, teachers and community leaders walked from the Swinomish Community Center, across Rainbow Bridge and through town to the La Conner schools last Wednesday to demonstrate their commitment to stay drug and alcohol free.

— Photo by Amylynn Richards

## La Conner taps sun for power

By Alexander Kramer

La Conner is growing greener with two solar energy projects going online.

Residents Gary and Leigh Giovane's Third Street home has a roof sporting new solar electric panels and a solar water heater, and the town's sewage treatment plant is the site of the first town-owned solar electric generating station.

The Giovanes' system powered up just this week. For weeks they were anxious: "I see the sun and

think we could be 'catching' all of that energy, and we can't yet," Gary Giovane said.

But on Tuesday, he said, "We are now officially active energy generators!"

Their new solar water heater was working immediately.

"The temperature of the town water is around 56 degrees," Giovane said. "During the day, the solar tubes can preheat the water at around 140 degrees. So that means our gas-powered hot water tank doesn't have to run as

often."

Last week's gale-force winds did not damage the new solar panels. They are installed to withstand 150-mile-per-hour gusts. "If your roof stays on, your array will stay on," said Ilan Fuss, a solar design consultant for Sunergy Systems, which installed the Giovanes' equipment.

La Conner's town solar project is expected to be producing power to help lower the town's electricity bill in a few weeks.

Town Administrator John Doyle said La Conner is one of the first municipal governments in the state to develop a project that is expected to qualify for the highest rate incentive.

Because the town's solar equipment is made entirely in Washington, the town will be able to sell any excess power it generates back to the grid at 54 cents per kilowatt hour — which is about six times what the town pays to buy electricity from Puget Sound Energy.

It's no accident that solar energy projects are beginning to pop up in La Conner. Skagit Valley is a prime Western

Washington location for solar energy production, Fuss said.

This region gets more sun than Seattle, and stays cooler in the summer than sunny Eastern Washington, where high temperatures can cause solar panels to produce less electricity.

When calculating the effectiveness of a solar system, consultants look at how many solar hours the area will receive, Fuss said.

This measurement is based off of 30 years of atmospheric data by the National Renewable Energy Laboratory.

A solar hour is a measurement of the sun's irradiance on a given location. It is considered an hour when the sun's irradiance is measured at 1,000 watts per square meter, Fuss said. La Conner receives 4.2 solar hours on an average day; Seattle receives 3.83.

Doyle said that in a few weeks, he will schedule a public workshop on alternative energy to give residents information they need to decide whether solar power would be a good choice for their own homes.



**ORGANIC FARMERS** — Charlotte and Glenn Johnson at their Mother Flight Farm, where they grow organic produce on Fir Island.

— Photo by Fred Owens

## Mother Flight Farm

By Fred Owens

Glenn Johnson's compost pile is a source of pride: It's hot — reaching over 150 degrees Fahrenheit inside — and it's made from a recipe he customized for his Fir Island organic farm.

His composted mixture of dairy manure, cattle bedding, seed hulls and old pea hay works wonders on the clay and silt at Mother Flight Farm, where Johnson and his wife, Charlotte, have been growing organic produce for 20 years.

He picked up soil packed around the roots of a rhubarb plant. It crumbled like a piece of cornbread. "That's pretty good tilth," he said.

Wonderful vegetables grow from good soil, summing up Glenn's agricultural philosophy.

Charlotte Johnson works in the greenhouse and in the fields, but leaves most of the tractor work to Glenn. She manages the farm stand on the weekend, and organizes the weekly foray to the Anacortes farmers market.

"The Anacortes market is our biggest source of income, but we have to work efficiently to make a profit," she said. "Just loading the boxes of produce is a big

job, going from the cooler to the truck, from the truck to the trestle table, then putting the boxes and the trestle table back in the truck, and then unloading the truck and putting what didn't sell back in the cooler at the end of the day."

Charlotte said they get many inquiries from visitors and would-be farmers, who see the farm's beauty and what may look like a laid-back lifestyle. "They want to have an organic farm like we do, but it's a lot more work than most people realize," she said.

The Johnsons work with persistent, non-stop energy. Growing more than 40 kinds of fruits and vegetables takes away the monotony of chores.

"I spend the morning planting peas and the afternoon hoeing spinach," Glenn said.

When the field work is done, the Johnsons put effort into community service. They are working to raise money to remodel the kitchen at the Rexville Grange, which is years past its good service. Refurbished, it could serve as a certified kitchen for farmers.

"Some local growers work on a pretty small scale, and

they need a certified kitchen to process their crops into jams, jellies, and pickles and other food products," Glenn said. "The health department won't let you use your home kitchen anymore. A friend of ours has to drive clear up to Alger to process her herbal vinegar."

If the Rexville kitchen was certified, it could be rented out for small-scale food processing. It would also make the grange hall a more attractive place for weddings and parties.

Glenn came up with an innovative scheme for raising money for the Rexville Grange. "I'm past 50, but I'm in pretty good shape," he said. "Well, I got into a conversation at the Skagit Food Valley Co-op with a young woman about half my age, and the upshot is that I challenged her to a foot race, a hundred-yard dash."

The young woman took up the bet, so Glenn sold tickets at a dollar apiece — a blue ticket to bet on him winning, and a pink ticket to bet on the young woman.

The race was two weeks ago. It was a tie. "But we raised a bunch of money," Glenn said.

## Verse, song and creativity coming to town

By Sandy Stokes

Poets from all over the U.S. and from around the world will convene in La Conner next week for the Skagit River Poetry Festival — a celebration of literature held every two years.

The festival headliners include Sherman Alexie, National Book Award winner for "The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian" and Pulitzer Prize winner, and former U.S. Poet Laureate Ted Kooser.

Two days of poetry readings and writer workshops with dozens of professional wordsmiths will follow a sold out fund-raising kickoff dinner on Thursday night, May 20. After the dinner, the festival events begin with a raucous adults-only evening featuring writer, social critic and stand-up comedian Sherman Alexie "unplugged."

On Friday and Saturday, May 21 and 22, La Conner artist Maggie Wilder will show her new film, "In the Hall of Light: The Work and Life of Robert Sund," at Gallery Cygnus on Commercial Street. Sund, a poet, was one of La Conner's renowned fishtown artists.

Nearly four dozen accomplished writers and poets, including Washington's Poet Laureate Samuel Green and entertaining Irish poet Tony Curtis, are scheduled to participate in the festival. The venues are all over

town, and include Maple Hall, both hilltop churches, the quilt museum, art museum and history museum, the schools, and several local businesses.

The Skagit River Poetry Project, the group behind the festival, exists to inspire creativity, especially in young minds. For more than 10 years, one of the project's main functions has been to put visiting poets in Skagit County classrooms to work directly with students.

The project's board is made up of volunteers that include educators as well as artists. Much of the festival is geared toward students, with special writing workshops and discussions for young people.

At La Conner High School, students in Wayne Johnston's creative writing class have produced an anthology of poems for this year's festival. (One of the poems appears on page 5.)

The festival's official anthology, *into the open*, is a collection of poems by many of the professional poets who are presenters during the festival.

Tickets to the festival range in price from \$12 for a single session to \$95 for all the sessions. The six writing workshops are \$52 each, and the Sherman Alexie show is \$25.

To purchase tickets, go to the festival website, www.skagitriverpoetry.org.

## Taste of the town

La Conner Chamber of Commerce has arranged a "Taste of La Conner" featuring cuisine from some of the best eateries in town on Friday, May 14 from 4 to 8 p.m.

For \$25, strolling diners can choose five stops on a taste trail that includes La Conner Seafood and Prime Rib, Seeds Bistro, Nell Thorn, Waterfront Café and Palmer's.

Buy tickets at participating restaurants or through the chamber office, 466-4775.