



Exclusive! ***Whatcom County Outpost Deputy Resigns Over Poor Living Conditions***

Updated 07-26-08

Whatcom County...*Uncovered* has learned from a soon to be former Whatcom County Deputy Sheriff, James Peterson, that the county is apparently up to it's old double standards and hypocrisy again, again with possible dangerous health implications. The deputy, who recently resigned from the Sheriff's Office after a 25 year long career in local law enforcement which includes service in Sudden Valley Security and Ferndale Police Department, decided to quit early, instead of retiring 17 months from now, over alleged health concerns and poor living conditions at his remote outpost residence in Newhalem.

Peterson has told WC...*U* that he continued to battle with WC administrators over a 4 month period that left he and his wife living in a 21 foot travel trailer alongside the house in question because of foul chemical odors leeching up through the residence floor joists, making he and his wife ill with headaches, dizziness, and fatigue. The outpost residence, owned and provided to WC by Seattle City Light, for WC resident deputy use, was tested for air quality by Seattle City Light "Safety & Health Specialists", but those results were not released to Peterson for over 3 months. According to Peterson, while awaiting the results, Seattle City Light and Whatcom County took no action to find Peterson and his wife alternative housing during the interim.

The results of testing were delayed, forcing Peterson to pursue independant air quality testing out of his own pocket to the tune of \$2400. According to Peterson, the alleged cause of the odor was later identified as the chemical [pentachlorophenol](#), also known as "penta" or PCP, a powerful wood preservative chemical similar to creosote, used to treat and protect utility power poles against insect damage and rot. According to US Enviromental Protection Agency information, this chemical is a known carcinogen that has short term affects that can damage the central nervous system and long term affects that are known to affect kidney and liver function, and may lead to cancer. The EPA information indicates exposure level limits are "zero", due to the risks associated with exposure to it.

Peterson, who has already turned in his resignation and 30 day notice to WCSO Chief Criminal Deputy Parks on July 7, advised WC...*U* that only then was Sheriff Elfo notified of the problems associated with the living conditions. Apparently not advised of the problems up to that point, Sheriff Elfo immediately attempted to reconcile the situation with Peterson. According to Peterson, he and his wife, already distraught and disgusted with the neglect and disinterest they'd received thus far in attempting to get the issue resolved through normal WC channels, declined Sheriff's Elfo's generous offers to find a resolution to the problem and to keep him on the force at least until his normal date of retirement. Peterson, a deputy in good standing, cited numerous attempts to have Chief Parks and WC adminstrators resolve the problems, to no avail. Peterson stated that he had no intention of resigning until the health/safety issue came to a head. According to Peterson, their repeated pleas for help had fallen largely on deaf ears and as a result he submitted

his resignation and declined the offer for alternative housing.

Newhalem is one of three remote outpost positions that WCSO deputies can bid in advance for assignment to, including Baker Lake and Point Roberts. WCSO also has assigned neighborhood deputies for East County/Maple Falls, Sudden Valley/Cain Lake, and Birch Bay. The deputies bid for these positions based on seniority and other prerequisites, but if there are no volunteers, deputies must be assigned to an outpost based on seniority and probation status. It is not known at this time how the current resident deputy problem will be resolved with Peterson's resignation and the housing problem.

In 2007, Whatcom County administrators were also heavily criticized for failing to remedy a recurring jail sewage leak that plagued WCSO staff repeatedly with inmate effluent leaking into lower offices below the jail cells and causing a variety of operational and health concerns. It is not known at this time how many people were exposed to inmates raw untreated urine and fecal matter, or what diseases they may have been carrying. At that time, Sheriff Elfo was quoted as saying to the Bellingham Herald "We have victims of crimes, including children, coming into our office where we have raw sewage leaking from the ceiling at times".

In response to an inquiry about these allegations, and an unrelated inquiry, Whatcom County Executive Pete Kremen provided the following statement via email:

"There is no merit to the allegations you have posed. I would like very much to provide you information and documentation regarding the matter. Please contact my office to make an appointment so we can meet and discuss these issues."

Sheriff Elfo also provided the following response to the developing story about Deputy Peterson's resignation:

"As part of an arrangement to provide law enforcement services in the area of the City of Seattle's Skagit River Project, Whatcom County has an arrangement with the City to provide the assigned deputy sheriff housing. The Sheriff's Office will not require a deputy sheriff and his or her family to reside in a structure while questions regarding environmental health remain unresolved. While these issues remain under review, the deputy in question has been offered alternative housing."

In reviewing email traffic provided by Peterson related to this issue, with advisories to county and Seattle City Light administrators dating back to February 2008, it's readily apparent that all concerned parties were aware of Peterson's concerns dating back to at least that timeframe. In a troubling email written by Lt. Cooley on 04-22-08, in response to one of Peterson's inquiries, Cooley seemed more concerned about Peterson's chain of command violation than the fact that he and his wife could be living in a contaminated home. Cooley also later referenced a pentachlorophenol data sheet stating "...it does look like there are potential health concerns...".

Peterson has provided WC...U with documentation supporting his claims. Peterson has also made it clear that although initial results of samples tested indicated the presence of "penta" in wood samples from floor joists of the residence in question. It was verbally conveyed to Peterson in a May '08 telephone conversation with Seattle City Light Safety and Health Specialist Matt Lundgren, who refused a request to put those results in writing at that time. This is significant because this phone conversation followed 2 previous interior air quality samples, and was the result of a third visit to the home in which wood samples were taken. After the wood samples were tested, there was a fourth visit to the residence in which another air sample was taken by Seattle City Light.

Peterson is awaiting the results of his privately contracted independent air quality testing and WC...U will be conducting an exclusive follow-up investigative report with him when those results become

available and are evaluated by qualified experts. WC...[U](#) has also recently learned from sources that wish to remain anonymous that this may not be the first time this sort of Newhalem residence treatment has taken place. Additionally, WC...[U](#) has learned that there is an annual contract between City of Seattle and Whatcom County and that the City of Seattle is paying \$870,404 to Whatcom County for the year 2008, with decreasing contracts dating back to at least 1999.

WC...[U](#) has confidentially received a copy of what appears to be the contract between City of Seattle and Whatcom County. There are no signatures on the copy we've received, but it is believed to be a legitimate photocopy of the current 4 page contract between the City of Seattle and Whatcom County. [Page 1](#), [Page 2](#), [Page 3](#), [Page 4](#). The contract specifies agreements between the parties and the usual contract language, including the resident deputy requirements and housing arrangements.

Interestingly, the contract expiration date is listed as December 31, 2008. It is not known at this time what factor this could be in Peterson's dispute. The veracity of these documents and Peterson's allegations will be explored as this story continues to develop.

Update: 07-26-08

WC...[U](#) has been provided with copies of test results relating to the independently contracted air quality tests that were performed at Peterson's Newhalem outpost residence. The results are raw data and are still being evaluated, but at first glance it does appear that a pentachlorophenol problem does exist, at least in the wood samples that were tested. I'm not a qualified chemist and will await interpretive analysis of the tests before any results or documents are posted.