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The Columbian

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Unemployment fund balance declines

Trust fund's slide
could trigger new
tax on businesses

By **JAKE
GOLDSTEIN-STREET**
Washington State Standard

Washington businesses would need to shoulder roughly \$700 million in additional taxes in a few years unless the projected

finances of the state's unemployment insurance fund improve.

Officials are looking at ways to avoid such a scenario.

Unemployment is relatively low in Washington. But pandemic-era policies and increased usage during the past couple of years have strained the state's unemployment system, which provides temporary payments to residents who lose

their jobs and are looking for new work.

Next year, employer taxes going into Washington's unemployment trust fund are expected to total \$1.7 billion, while benefit payouts rise to \$2.4 billion, according to the latest actuarial analysis released this month.

At the end of September, the trust fund, which only pays benefits and not administrative costs, had about \$3.8 billion, totaling

7.9 months of benefits on hand if collections suddenly stopped. As payroll taxes lag payouts, that's projected to drop to 7.1 months by the same time next year, and 6.3 in 2027.

Therein lies the problem.

Dropping below seven months of benefits on Sept. 30 of a given year triggers a state tax of up to 0.2 percent on businesses to bring the trust fund back up to a healthy nine months of pay-

ments. As unemployment skyrocketed during the pandemic, this metric plummeted, but the state waived this tax from 2021 through 2025. This would've been the only time it ever could've been levied.

That possible solvency surcharge in 2028 and 2029 would raise an estimated \$350 million each year. It would be applied equally across all employers.

News of this potential tax

comes as Washington businesses begin to shoulder billions of dollars in new and increased taxes passed this year to fill a shortfall in the state's operating budget.

James Crandall, who represents the Association of Washington Business on the state's unemployment insurance advisory committee, said the Employment Security Department,

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Regulations swamp businessman



Photos by **TAYLOR BALKOM**/The Columbian

Vancouver business owner Jeff Davis stands Oct. 23 on the property near Ridgefield where he had hoped to build a manufacturing plant for his business, TennMax America. He poured \$1 million into planning a new facility on the property, but backed out when county and state regulations became too onerous.

TennMax owner halts
project near Ridgefield
after spending \$1M

By **SARAH WOLF**
The Columbian

A local businessman spent a year and a half trying to build a new manufacturing plant in a Clark County area planned for economic development, only to bring the project to a halt after compounding regulatory hurdles.

Now he's left with an empty lot and a pile of planning papers he can't use.

"The issue is not, 'Did they follow the rules?'" said Jeff Davis, president at Vancouver-based TennMax America. "We own the property. We've invested a million dollars. And I

think it's gotten so outrageous that I'm canceling it."

State and county regulators say they are doing their jobs protecting the environment and promoting safety. But local developers and business owners say the regulations are impeding the state's other goals of providing jobs and housing for more people.

Davis hoped to expand his manufacturing operation into the north county's Discovery Corridor, an area local leaders hoped would be fertile ground for job creation.

Davis' team at TennMax builds specialized components for electronics manufacturing. The company has offices in three countries, including the United States.

Davis hoped to double the staff of 30 workers he has here,

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A culvert pokes out from underneath a driveway near Ridgefield. Wetlands on property where Jeff Davis, president at TennMax America, had hoped to build a manufacturing plant caused him to back out of the project. "During the full process I just felt like they thought I didn't have a choice and no matter what they required I would just do it," Davis said. "Well, I have a choice, and my choice is to not expand in Clark County."

COMMUNITY FUNDED JOURNALISM

Portland demands cease and desist

PeaceHealth receives
letter after disabled
senior left at shelter

By **MIA RYDER-MARKS**
The Columbian

Portland's city attorney sent PeaceHealth a letter demanding that the Vancouver-based health care system stop dropping off patients at Portland shelters without making prior arrangements.

The letter states that on Sept. 2 "PeaceHealth's Fisher's Landing Clinic discharged a homeless 70-year-old wheelchair user, placed her in a cab, and sent her to downtown Portland. She arrived at an overnight shelter nearly eight hours before the shelter's scheduled opening. In those hours before staff could assist her, she sat alone and vulnerable on a Portland street, in nearly 90-degree heat."

Portland City Attorney Robert Taylor sent the letter on Sept. 10 to Elizabeth Dunne, PeaceHealth's president and CEO. An article published Oct. 21 by the Portland-based newspaper Willamette Week brought the letter to light.

Taylor cited a Washington law that requires hospitals maintain discharge policies that assess patients' ability care for themselves and notify any lay caregiver of aftercare requirements.

"The City will seek all available regulatory, civil, and criminal remedies for any instances where homeless patients are discharged to Portland shelters without prior communication, planning, and approval," the letter states. "We understand PeaceHealth has opened an investigation into this matter and we welcome continued conversation after its completion."

In response to The Columbian's inquiry, spokesman

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notebook: Looking
back on Week 9

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Trump administration
will partially fund
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Four races that
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