

School officials plan in person high school graduation while awaiting approval

June 7, 2020



Many schools in the Del Norte Unified School District this week will look like ground zero for parade routes as students and parents participate in drive through graduation ceremonies.

While the county health officer has not approved the plans yet, school officials are moving forward with the preferred in-person graduation ceremony for Del Norte High School seniors.

Meanwhile several schools have already made public their plans for drive through ceremonies throughout the week on the following schedule:

- Smith River Elementary School, 4:30 p.m., June 9
- Mountain Elementary School, 6 p.m., June 9
- Sunset High School, 6 p.m., June 9
- Del Norte Community School, 3 p.m., June 10
- Redwood Elementary School, 6 p.m., June 10
- Castle Rock Charter School eighth grade, 4 p.m. June 11
- Castle Rock Charter School 12th grade, 5 p.m. June 11
- Crescent Elk Middle School, 5 p.m., June 11

Each school has posted specifics to their graduation ceremony on their Facebook pages.

Superintendent Jeff Harris told the board of supervisors Thursday that while the State Department of Public Health has given a lot of guidance when it comes to preventing the spread of COVID-19 in large gatherings, the California Department of Education has not. The final decision to allow variances into the state's phased reopening has been left up to county health officers. Harris said Dr. Warren Rehwaldt has not made the final decision yet allowing an outdoor graduation ceremony.

"We looked at what can we do, where is the line and want to walk right up to it," Harris said. "Kids deserve recognition for the years they put in, the work they've done. This is one of the rights of passage everybody experiences. We don't want this will be the first class not to really have graduation."

Harris said working with students, teachers and community members, the preferred Plan A will be a two-stage outdoor graduation DNHS Whalen Field on June 12. Harris said with 180 seniors eligible to graduate, 90 would graduate at 4:30 p.m. and another 90 at 7:30 p.m. One group of 45 will come through the east gate, and another 45 through the west gate. Each graduate will be allowed to bring two to three family members who will be seated six feet apart in the bleachers. The seniors will be seated 12 feet apart on the football field.

While school officials will be sitting on the stage, there will be no hugs or handshakes as students come across the stage and pick up their diploma covers. The actual diploma will be made available to the student at a later date, Harris said.

At the end of the first ceremony, chairs and seats will be sanitized and prepared for the next group of graduates.

School Board President Frank Magarino said the preferred option should be a no brainer to be able to pull off.

"These kids have missed out on a lot - sports, prom, dance," Magarino said. "If we can do this... I don't know what's holding back. It's a no brainer in my opinion. I would want go through with this."

Principal Randy Fugate walked through Plan B option of a drive through graduation ceremony.

"I got depressed last week with these plans, thinking we're not doing that," Fugate said. "But, if we're really doing this, then we still want a full ceremony of students crossing the stage."

For Plan B, Harding and Small streets will be closed off. Parents and graduates will be queued up in 160 cars and wind their way up to the stage. Meanwhile, radio station KPOD has offered to broadcast the ceremony live, Fugate said, so they can listen to the whole ceremony. In addition, it will also be streamed for those who could not be there in person.

Fugate said the graduate will then get out, walk across the stage for their diploma, while the family follows in position, staying in their cars.

Nobody voted for a third option, a virtual ceremony. Elizabeth Ward, School Board Student Representative, said her fellow seniors voted for the in-person graduation as their first preference.

“The drive through was the second choice,” Ward said. “The virtual option got destroyed. It got no votes.”

Harris said the administration could hear back from Rehwaldt as soon as Tuesday or as late as Thursday. He said the graduation ceremony will be planned on a parallel track, ready to go regardless which gets approved.

“If we get guidance Tuesday, we do have time to set up - 360 chairs, stage, flags. We will make it happen,” Harris said.

Fugate added a fourth option to delay the ceremony, to say July 12 or 15, was also briefly considered but discarded.

“Our concerns for July 12 was what if we still can’t do it? We don’t have a guarantee for July 12 or 15. The delay would only be to a possible date. It could be delayed, then delayed some more,” Fugate said.

He added students could eventually miss out who are moving on to the next stage of their lives, be it college or the military.

Harris promised the board members while waiting to hear back from Rehwaldt, he would also check into the school district’s liability coverage for hosting an outdoor event. He said normal insurance coverage could be \$10,000 while being placed in a high-risk category could increase costs to \$25,000.