

County looks to preparedness, projects after beating virus

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Officials in Del Norte County are looking to spend the new year moving beyond the challenges of 2020, according to County Administrative Officer Jay Sarina.

“We just came out of what I would consider one of our more negative years,” Sarina said Monday.

In 2021, Sarina said the county hopes to help county businesses and residents reopen and rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for what comes next.

The first priority, though?

“Right now one of the biggest issues is obviously pandemic,” Sarina said. “The current level of restrictions is obviously affecting our small businesses.”

Before much else can happen, Sarina said the community needs to get the virus under control so it can reduce restrictions on businesses and return to “some sense of normalcy.”

He's seen the county's ability to respond to the virus change over time. At the beginning, officials were reacting to a lot of unknowns, he said.

"Now, we're looking at getting through the vaccine rollout," Sarina said.

Turning the corner with vaccinations and reducing the county's COVID-19 case count will allow businesses to reopen full, and safely. Over 450,000 had received the first dose of a vaccine by Monday.

"For us locally, that's huge," he said.

The pandemic has provided county officials a learning opportunity. Sarina said the health crisis has highlighted how much the county relies on volunteers for its Office of Emergency Services and public health department.

There's a higher rate of turnover with volunteers than with paid staff, Sarina said. That means volunteers require more regular training to be prepared for future emergencies.

"Because we rely on volunteers and other agencies, it's become apparent that we have to get deeper and deeper with trained bodies," Sarina said.

That's all going to translate into one of the county's major efforts in the new year: A tsunami preparedness initiative and a full-scale evacuation drill in the fall. March 2021 will mark the 10-year anniversary of the last tsunami to hit Del Norte County, after a 9.0 earthquake near Japan sent waves to the western U.S. and killed one in Crescent City.

The last full-scale evacuation drill was about a decade ago, too, Sarina said, since an effort like that takes a "tremendous amount of planning."

So, the collaborative spirit between individuals and public agencies highlighted by the pandemic will be needed for the initiative, from education efforts like Tsunami Preparedness Week and the Great ShakeOut to the evacuation drill.

"It's everybody, getting everybody involved," Sarina said. "It's significant because obviously Crescent City has been effected or will be effected in the future."

Beyond emergency preparedness, county officials anticipate infrastructure improvements in the new year, too. The county plans to apply for state grants for park projects through Proposition 68 funding and will continue upgrades to the recreation gymnasium and Pyke Field, Sarina said.

Other infrastructure projects will be on the agenda as county officials will also begin planning to use the funds from the 1% sales tax imposed on unincorporated areas of the county by Measure R, approved in November's general election.

Those new funds — about \$1.2 million a year, county officials estimated prior to the election — will be designated for county programs, like law enforcement, emergency dispatch, street repairs and other county

services. The spending of the funds will be overseen by a seven-member committee, to include five area residents appointed by the Board of Supervisors.

Still, the new funding coupled with state and federal funding sources won't cover all of what the county hopes to do, Sarina said.

"The cost of doing business keeps going up, and revenue does not always keep pace," Sarina said.

Still, he's optimistic the lessons learned in 2020 can be translated into recovery in 2021.

"I see us going in a positive direction from a city and a county standpoint."