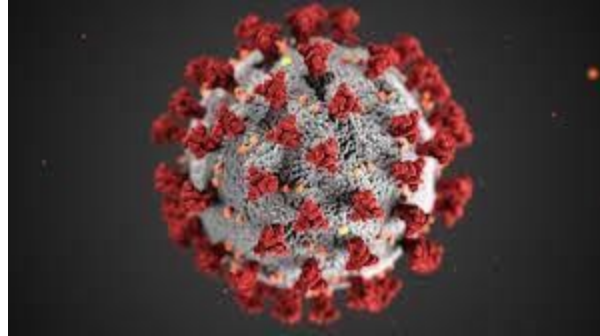


Another COVID-19 case in Del Norte as reopening continues

June 17, 2020



The first confirmed active case of the coronavirus in two weeks was registered on Del Norte County's COVID-19 online information hub Tuesday. This came just one day after the Del Norte County Public Health Officer reported to the City Council that he didn't know the status of the virus in the community.

"The cluster of cases that we had in mid-May has pretty much settled down as far as we can tell," Dr. Warren Rehwaldt told councilors. "So, it does raise the question of how active is the COVID-19 virus in our community now? My answer is I don't know. I don't really know for sure. I always worry about the fact that we're so small and spread out as a community that it's possible with all these precautions in place the virus could periodically shut down and have to be reintroduced. I don't know if that's the case here. I think we just need to wait and watch a little longer."

Rehwaldt's report included news from a June 12 press release from the California Department of Public Health allowing massage, tattoo, facial and manicure services to resume this Friday. The new openings follow on the heels of Rehwaldt's June 11 order allowing RV parks, campgrounds and vacation rentals, aquariums and outdoor recreation businesses to allow tourists and guided tours. In addition, hotels were allowed to open at 50 percent capacity to non-essential travelers.

Rehwaldt said the newest openings "was actually pretty good timing because we opened up some businesses on the 12th, then we were staging a little more opening of businesses two weeks down the road. So, we were splitting the difference."

Rehwaldt outlined in a letter to the community last week California Department of Public Health guidelines businesses must follow to reopen where customers have to remove face coverings to receive massages, tattoos, facials and manicures.

“We are recommending that for these encounters, salon owners and stylists consider using an N95 respirator, rather than a typical cloth mask,” Rehwaldt wrote. “A respirator is designed to protect the user more than it protects others, and for an encounter with an unmasked customer, the extra protection may be well worth the effort. Respirators can be safely reused if allowed to sit unused for five days.”

Rehwaldt added N95 respirators should be placed in a paper bag so they can “breathe” and dry out.

Rehwaldt told council members he stuck with the staggered reopening schedule for businesses because little is still known about the virus’s spread. He pointed to Humboldt County as taking similar measures.

“I know it’s a hardship on some of the businesses that have to wait a little bit longer and I fully understand that and appreciate it,” Rehwaldt said. “But I also understand we have a relatively small hospital, a relatively small health care system, and we have to be kind of careful in the steps going forward. Because this is where opening up too much, too fast can become problematic for us.”

He said he didn’t want a potential coronavirus spike to overwhelm the system, forcing him to take a step backward forcing businesses to close down again.

Rehwaldt then talked about the Public Health Branch using the new Biobot technology to test the city’s wastewater.

“The Biobot is a system of measuring the presence of genetic material in wastewater. It gives us a snapshot of cases in the community, but not of specific individuals,” Rehwaldt explained. “As a tool, we really don’t know how useful it is because it’s relatively new technology.”

He said a May 6 test showed no genetic evidence of the coronavirus in the city’s wastewater. A second test May 12 showed evidence consistent with about 120 cases in the community. That number was adjusted up to 180 cases May 19.

“I think the next data set will be really important to help tell us what’s going on in the community,” he added.

Going forward, Rehwaldt said the health office has two main goals. First, to slowly filter the virus through the community and build up herd immunity in the population in a safe way. Second, to use aggressive contact tracing tactics to identify cases and keep clusters of new cases in check as much as possible.

“It may reach a point where that’s not going to work, or it might not work enough to keep the virus increasing. And that’s when we have to be especially watchful and careful. Contact tracing seemed to be very effective with the last outbreak we had,” he said.

The health official then addressed concerns that Curry County to the north has been opening up more services, more quickly.

“We also need to recognize that most of Southern Curry County is still part of our medical system. And if the disease starts taking hold in Southern Curry County, it’s going to impact our health care system, especially at the hospital,” Rehwaldt said.