

Crescent City declares local emergency — City pool closed, public events suspended through April 6

March 20, 2020



The Crescent City Council voted unanimously Monday, March 16, to declare a local emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, the council reluctantly voted to close Fred Endert Municipal Pool and suspend all community events that required city approval. That included events at the Cultural Center, youth sports and Live From Downtown: It's First Friday.

In addition, city staff will not shut off customers' water for nonpayment for the duration of the local emergency declaration, which will be reviewed in 60 days.

Mayor Blake Inscore outlined the dire situation unfolding due to the coronavirus outbreak.

“Obviously, we are in unprecedented times. We are very fortunate for the staff and leadership that we have,” Inscore said.

City Manager Eric Wier told the council federal guidelines were changing quickly, the most recent discouraging gatherings of more than 10 people. Some counties in the state have also asked residents to shelter-in-place.

“It makes common sense. If you have more healthcare resources, you’re better able to care for patients that have it and fatality rates are lower if you have better resources,” Wier told the council. “If this spreads, and we have a giant, massive situation where people are going to be seeking healthcare, it will overwhelm our healthcare system.”

Councilor Isaiah Wright and Mayor Pro Tem Heidi Kime were already adhering to social distancing guidelines by participating in the meeting via Zoom. Staff also took public comments through email and limited the number of attendees at the Flynn Center.

Wier explained the emergency declaration will allow him to bypass going first to the City Council for approval on such matters as purchasing supplies, contracting services and making any temporary changes needed to personnel policies and agreements with local unions.

“What this resolution really does is allows us to be responsive as an agency. As a city, we have a responsibility to our community to keep our first responders in a situation where they can respond effectively and efficiently — including law enforcement, fire, public works, water and sewer,” he said.

“When we’re talking about personnel working from home, that means extra resources, extra computers so we can respond and stay active and effective as a government. He can also handle personnel details such as shift changes and sick time,” he added.

Wier explained employees from City Hall, Housing Authority and Finance Department would need about 13-15 laptops and a number of secure cell phones to work from home. He estimated a cost of \$20,000 to \$25,000 which would come from funds across the city’s budget, such as the general fund and water and sewer funds.

Kime asked about how access to federal funds would work with the emergency declaration, referring to President Trump’s national emergency declaration March 13 freeing up \$50 billion to state and local governments.

“You make a declaration like this, when you start to overwhelm your local resources, that is exactly what we see coming as this unfolds at an unprecedented speed. By doing this, we’ll be in a good position as other resources become available,” Wier said.

Councilmember Jason Greenough added he thought it was important that city leaders ensure the public that the city is trying to do everything it can to keep them safe and healthy.

“But at the same time, try to encourage people not to panic. We have yet to have a positive reading of COVID-19 in Del Norte County. It would be prudent to stay calm. It will be some time before we come out of this. If we stick together, at arm's length, we will make it through this,” Greenough said.

When it came to the city's pool, Wier said it required stiffer actions.

“With the swimming pool, it is very hard to implement social distancing, with lap swim areas, aerobic, exercise, recreation programs, it's almost impossible to implement, not to mention in the locker rooms and public gatherings of well over 10 people,” he explained.

Wier added shutting down pool lets its workforce perform a deep cleaning and catch up on facility maintenance. City staff also reached out to the Department of Public Health and Northwest Physical Therapy and were able to make accommodations at a local hotel pool, to facilitate those patients who used the pool for physical therapy.

The pool closure announcement drew some pushback.

Del Norte County resident and regular pool visitor Mike Gomez, 70, said preventive measures would work better than a closure. He suggested patrons fill out a health form and have their temperature taken and only be turned away if they were sick.

“All the people who go there are already healthy swimmers. I ask people there already and they say, ‘I hope we don't close it because how are we going to remain healthy?’”

Robin Hartwick also addressed the issue via email, hoping the pool would remain open. She pointed out the YMCA pool in Grants Pass and the Humboldt Pool remain open and that the recommended gatherings of 10 people or less is for those in the high-risk category.

“I'm thinking the high risk would self-identify and keep themselves safe as needed,” Hartwick wrote.

Resident Douglas Suzuki, opining from Zoom, worried about swimmers who don't rely on Northwest Physical Therapy and use the pool. He also noted in the last few years he's used the pool, it's had “way less than 10 people in the locker room” yet remained open.

“It would be detrimental for them not to be able to go there because using the pool has less impact on their joints. Especially if they have new surgery or hip surgery,” Suzuki said.

Crescent City Recreation Director Holly Wendt explained if the pool were to remain open under the 10-person guideline, three of those people would have to be employees, thus further limiting patrons to seven.

“We don't have a way of limiting people's access. How are we going to allow the first seven people in and for how long? People travel from all over, Brookings, Hiouchi, Grants Pass, how are we going to ensure people travel that distance won't get in? Logistically, it's a harder thing to navigate than it seems to create that safety,” Wendt said.

Kime said she's less concerned about pool patrols from Brookings but is hesitant to bar local taxpayers. She supported the closure while recognizing the ongoing necessity for those in physical therapy. She recommended revisiting the issue at the City Council's April 6 meeting, while going through deep cleaning and working out logistics.

"This is an evolving situation, by the minute it seems. So, I don't want people to feel like we're shutting things down and we're turning people away," Kime said.

Inscore agreed staff needs to look at creative ways to accommodate the needs of those who rely on the pool for their basic health requirements.

"If there is a way to manage the pool and do so safely, I think it's worth looking into," Inscore said.